Sound and Vision: Mysticism, Dante's *Commedia* and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

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Note on the Text

Rossetti's poems, sonnets and songs are taken from Jan Marsh's *Collected Writings* because as a modern edition it provides a more complete picture of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's burgeoning poetical maturity and the location of each work within his poetic evolution than Jerome McGann's more selective *Collected Poetry and Prose*. For sonnets from *The House of Life* sequence I use the 1881 first edition because it offers a more comprehensive rendering of the sonnet sequence than is available in *Poems* (1870) and whilst Jerome McGann's edited edition oscillates between the former and later versions, selecting variants as '"Reading texts"'[1] he does so in order to convey his chosen interpretation of the poem. I have opted, generally, to use Jan Marsh's *Collected Writings*, supplementing (where appropriate) from Rossetti's originally published editions in cases where textual variations are significant or require referencing. For Dante's *Commedia* I have chosen to make use of the dual English-Italian translated edition by Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez because I am mindful that Rossetti would have read the *Commedia* in its original Italian. As such, I will make reference to both the English translation and the original Italian text of the *Commedia*, especially in the first instance but without repetition. Finally, all biblical references will be taken from the *King James Version* as this is the version that has had the most pervasive influence on English literature.

[1] Jerome McGann, 'Introduction', in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed.by Jerome McGann (London: Yale University Press, 2003, p.xxviii-xxix.

List of Abbreviations

Works (and Collections) of Rossetti

BS	Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ballads and Sonnets* (London: Ellis, 1881).
CPP	*Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
CW	*Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Writings*, ed. by Jan Marsh (London: J.M. Dent, 1999).
DHC	*Dante and His Circle: With the Italian Poets Preceding Him* (London: Ellis, 1874).
DMR	*Dear Mr Rossetti: The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Hall Caine 1878-1881*, ed. by Vivian Allen (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).
DGRJM	*Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris: Their Correspondence*, ed. John Bryson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).
EIP	*The Early Italian Poets From Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300)*, (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1861).
FLM	*Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family-Letters with a Memoir*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti, 2 vols, *(London: Ellis, 1895),*
Fredeman	*The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by William E. Fredeman, Vols.1-7, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004).
LDGR	*Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* ed. by Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).
NL	*The New Life (La Vita Nuova) of Dante Alighieri*, trans. by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1899).
P	*Poems*, (London: Ellis, 1870).
PNE	*Poems. A New Edition*, (London: Ellis & White, 1881)
WDGR	*The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. by William Michael Rossetti (London, Ellis, 1911).

Works by Dante

Inferno	*Inferno*, ed. by Durling et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
Purgatorio	*Purgatorio*, ed. by Durling et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
Paradiso	*Paradiso*, ed. by Durling et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Other Works

OSOS	*Bernard of Clairvaux: On the Song of Songs*, trans. by Kilian Walsh and Irene Edmonds, 4 vols (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971– 1980).
BCSW	*Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* trans. by G.R. Evans (HarperOne: New York, NY, 2005).

Abstract

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was saturated in the poetry of Dante, whose presence in his life was mediated by his father's lifelong Dante scholarship. This would be a fraught but defining relationship for Rossetti. As William Michael Rossetti would comment in his *Memoir*: 'Dante Alighieri was a sort of banshee in the Charlotte Street houses; his shriek audible even to familiarity, but the message of it not scrutinized'.[2]

It is the contention of this thesis that contrary to prevailing critical assumptions, Rossetti's understanding of the aesthetics and theology of Dante's *Commedia* has been underestimated, and that this understanding informed his own poetry, particularly in its more theological inflections. As such, I argue, Rossetti's mystical expression can and should be traced back to Rossetti's exposure to (and sometimes fraught) relationship with the aesthetics and theology of Dante's *Commedia*, which is itself formed out of a dialogue with the mystic tradition in both medieval and patristic theology. The mystics who populate Dante's *Paradiso* – Augustine, Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux and others – consistently employ an erotic language that reappears in the sonnets of *The House of Life*, the subjects of Rossetti's paintings, and in much of his poetry. Rossetti did not encounter this mystical expression exclusively through the *Commedia,* but undoubtedly its presentation in Dante's seminal work was a key influence on both Rossetti's understanding and representation of the soul's relationship to God, and also of the lover's analogous relationship with the beloved, from its most strained to its most ecstatic moments.

Each chapter of this thesis considers Rossetti's relationship to both the aesthetics and theology of Dante's *Commedia*. Chapter One uncovers the infernal anxieties present in Rossetti's poems, that is the impulse towards despair as a response to the lover's awareness of his unworthiness before God and the beloved. Chapter Two examines Rossetti's use of the gaze to relocate Purgatory from a stage in the afterlife to a lived emotional experience for the lover. Chapter Three reveals Rossetti's use of the mirror imagery of *Paradiso* to express the mysticism of Bonaventure and Bernard of Clairvaux; Chapter Four positions Rossetti as an interrogator of the long-standing

[2] *FLM*, I., p.65

Christian tradition of praise and Chapter Five unveils the silence of the Rossettian beloved as replicating the silence of God.

Taken as a whole, this thesis radically reconfigures our understanding of the Victorian language of desire, by exposing the theological genealogy inherent in subject-object relations, which transcends gender norms and reminds us that the spiritual can be sensual. It further reveals the common ground in discourses on desire occurring separately in medieval and Victorian scholarship, which when viewed in tandem may open up fruitful and insightful new pathways in both.

Introduction

And did'st thou know indeed, when at the font
  Together with thy name thou gav'st me his,
  That also on thy son must Beatrice
Decline her eyes according to her wont,
Accepting me to be of those that haunt
  The vale of magical dark mysteries
  Where to the hills her poet's foot-track lies
And wisdom's living fountain to his chaunt
Trembles in music? This is that steep land
  Where he that holds his journey stands at gaze
    Tow'rd sunset, when the clouds like a new height
Seem piled to climb. These things I understand:
  For here, where day still soothes my lifted face,
    On thy bowed head, my father, fell the night.

– 'Dantis Tenebræ (In Memory of my Father)', *CW*, p.248.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was saturated in the poetry of Dante, whose presence in his life was mediated by his father's lifelong Dante scholarship. This would be a fraught but defining relationship for Rossetti. As William Michael Rossetti would comment in his *Memoir*: 'Dante Alighieri was a sort of banshee in the Charlotte Street houses; his shriek audible even to familiarity, but the message of it not scrutinized'.[3]

Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti was born in London on 5 May 1828, the eldest son of an intensely literary family with strong Italian roots. His father, Gabriele, was a poet, revolutionary and scholar, who in 1824, fled his native Naples as a political exile after being sentenced to death for composing odes critical of Italy's autocratic regime. Arriving in London, he worked as an Italian tutor and wrote a commentary on Dante Aligheri's *La Divina Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*) when he met and married Frances Polidori, who as the sister of Byron's physician and author of novella *The Vampyre*, John Polidori, was also a woman with strong literary ties. Gabriele became Professor of Italian at King's College London where he pursued an obsessive interest in Dante, resulting in his *sui generis* commentaries of Dante's *Commedia*, which he

[3] *FLM*, I., p.65

read as a cipher that covertly expressed Dante's sectarian political ideology.[4] Gabriele himself was a prominent member of a secret society of Italian revolutionaries, the Carbonari, and saw a clear correlation between the Carbonari's use of religious symbols to disguise their political views and Dante's political affiliation with the thirteenth-century Ghibelline movement. For Gabriele, the *Commedia* represented the most complete codification of Dante's politics.

As Valeria Tinkler Villani has shown, in his own day 'Rossetti's meta-interpretation [was seen] at best highly subjective and at worst insane […] Gabriele claimed the existence of such sectarian language, and in doing so became an object of ridicule'.[5] Antonio Panizzi, a contemporary of Gabriele's and an Italian political refugee, denounces Gabriele's theories in the *The Foreign Review* as 'perfect and sublime nonsense'.[6] Panizzi accuses Gabriele of 'clutching at *fumus et umbra* [smoke and shadows]'[7] by imposing his own protracted arguments onto the *Commedia*:

> The fact is that Signor Rossetti has gratuitously commenced a theory, without due examination of the Florentine's writings, and has afterwards ransacked those very writings for the appropriate elucidation of his ingenious suppositions. The result is, however, that he has entirely failed[8]

Gabriele's somewhat eccentric and questionable scholarship would lead to him losing his position at King's and cause serious damage to both his health and reputation. However, the result of Gabriele's fixation on the *Commedia* was the overwhelming presence of Dante in the imaginative life of his children. So intensive were his father's scholarly labours that Gabriel developed a childhood fear of his father's study, which he believed was 'haunted' by the ghost of Dante. He sensed 'the very books' in it giving off strange lights with 'a conscious and external life of their own'.[9] Though the Rossetti children could not, in those early days, have understood the importance of Dante as a touchstone for their literary or visual inventions, they certainly became aware by adulthood, as each in turn would fall under the shadow of what William

[4] See Gabriele Rossetti, *Disquisitions on the Antipapal Spirit which produced the Reformation*, trans. by Miss Caroline Ward, 2 vols, (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1834).
[5] Valeria Tinkler Villani, 'In the footsteps of his father? Dantean Allegory in Gabriele Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti', in *Outsiders Looking In: The Rossettis Then and Now* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), p.136 (pp.131-144).
[6] Antonio Panizzi, 'La Divina Commedia di Dante Aligheri Con Comento Analitico di Gabriele Rossetti', in *The Foreign Review*, ed. by John George Cochrane (London: Black, Young and Young, 1828), p.176.
[7] Panizzi, p.177.
[8] Panizzi, p.177.
[9] Stanley Weintraub, *Four Rossettis: A Victorian Family Biography*, (London: Allen, 1978), p.6.

Michael identified as 'our father's Dantesque studies [that] saturated the household air with wafts and rumours of the mighty Alighieri'.[10] He suggests an acute awareness of failing to measure up to the towering and inimitable figure of Dante, but also being unable to escape or carry on the legacy of their father's scholarship.

Haunted by the allegorical readings that had made Gabriele a laughing-stock, the relationship between the Rossettis and the *Commedia* became increasingly fraught. As such, the Rossetti children sought to distance themselves from their father's political allegory, yet none could help but directly engage with his views or the *Commedia*, even if their responses came in the form of an outright rejection or a critical wariness that preferred to stress literality. William Michael translated Dante's *Inferno* in 1865, though (in clear opposition to Gabriele), he emphatically declared that the 'aim of this translation of Dante may be summed up in one word – Literality'[11]; Maria wrote a commentary on the *Commedia* entitled *A Shadow of Dante* (1871), which followed her brother's interpretive lead, using his *Inferno* as source material and emphasising (more than once) that her methodology and purpose are 'faithful literality'.[12] Gabriel produced binding designs for both these works and Christina composed poetry in the spirit of Dante by constructing a highly sensual and fantastical poetical world in order to reveal theological truth.[13] Dante Gabriel Rossetti actually did a version of the above, translating Dante's *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*) into English, which he began working on in the late forties and was published in 1861 within a collection of Italian poetry titled *The Early Italian Poets From Ciullo D' Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300)*. Rossetti composed three poems directly addressing his relationship to his medieval namesake: 'Dantis Tenebrae' a tribute to Gabriele Rossetti, 'Dante at Verona' portraying Dante's composition of the *Commedia* in exile, and 'On the "Vita Nuova" of Dante' expressing Rossetti's response to reading *La Vita Nuova*. He would continually translate, illustrate and render poetically subjects and themes from both Dante's *La Vita Nuova* and *Commedia* throughout his life. As Dante Gabriel's passion for his literary namesake grew, he would come to fashion for himself something of a double life: known as

[10] *FLM*, I., p.63.
[11] William Michael Rossetti, 'Preface', *The Hell* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1865), p.i.
[12] Maria Francesca Rossetti, 'Prefatory and Introductory', in *A Shadow of Dante* (Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers, 1872), p.6.
[13] For Christina's debt to Dante see Alison Milbank, 'Maria Francesca and Christina Rossetti: the preservation of distance', in *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp.131-149.

Gabriel in private by 'his family, and generally by his closer intimates'[14] and designating himself Dante's nineteenth century reincarnation through his assumed name, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, to the rest of the world. William Michael recalls that it was by 'the close of his twenty-first year, or the beginning of his twenty-second, that [Dante Gabriel] adopted this form of the Christian names [in correspondence], to which he ever afterwards adhered'.[15]

However, there is the sense that the other Rossetti children, in so consistently insisting on the 'literality'[16] of their approaches towards Dante, may have been protesting too much. This veneer of literality wears increasingly thin when Dante Gabriel enters the fray, claiming in 1863 in a letter to Ernest Gambert that his painting *The Salutation of Beatrice* (1859) 'treated […] the real and not the allegorical side of Dante's love-story'.[17]

Fig. 1 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Salutation of Beatrice*, 1859. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

The oil in two panels (fig.1) presents two distinct scenes from *La Vita Nuova* and *Commedia* alongside each other: the meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Florence and their reunion in Eden from Canto XXX of *Purgatorio*. His strict division between 'real' and 'allegorical' proves to be illusory, however, because, as Rossetti notes, the subjects he illustrates are not purely historical but are fictive, components of a 'love-story'. Rossetti's version of this story ends with a double reunion for Dante's pilgrim

[14] *FLM*, II., p.20.
[15] *FLM*, II., p.47.
[16] Maria Francesca Rossetti, 'Prefatory and Introductory', p.6.
[17] *LDGR*, II, p.491.

in Eden, with Beatrice cast as both his earthly beloved and spiritual saviour. Rossetti reinforces Beatrice's double nature by inscribing into the frame, below the right panel, Beatrice's first words to the pilgrim in Eden: 'Guardami ben: ben son, ben son Beatrice' ('Look at us well! Truly I am, truly I am Beatrice').[18] Rossetti, like Dante, has Beatrice recall God's words: 'I am, I am the Lord'[19] in order to demonstrate the inextricable link between her status as both beloved and divine spokesperson and Christ's dual nature as divine and mortal. Moreover, Rossetti demonstrates in his introduction to *La Vita Nuova* that he did not in any case view the book as a simple historical account or 'Autobiography'[20] of Dante's youth in Florence. He calls it an 'Autopsychology'[21], a kunstlerroman that is intensely interested in the mental workings of the artist as a young man, preoccupied with exploring the nexus between the subject of desire, the creative process, memory and poetic output. By turns, he sees it is a personal history, sonnet sequence and kind of meta-poetry. Hence, when Rossetti writes of the 'real' side of 'Dante's love-story' he does so aware of the superficiality of the divide between historical fact and poetic creation, and points to the construction of his own artistic composition but also Dante's handiwork in crafting a narrative that is multi-faceted and layered with fact, invention, and allegory.

In his Preface to *Early Italian Poets*, Rossetti distinguishes between two kinds of translation. One is 'literality of rendering', that is replicating word-for-word the meaning of the poem and the other is what he calls 'fidelity':

> a translation […] remains perhaps the most direct form of commentary. The life-blood of rhymed translation is this, – that a good poem should not be turned into a bad one. The only true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language must be to endow a fresh nation, as far as possible, with one more possession of beauty. Poetry not being an exact science, literality of rendering is altogether secondary to this chief aim. I say *literality,* – not fidelity, which by no means the same thing.[22]

For Rossetti, the 'chief aim' of translation is not to choose either 'literality', historicity and substance over poetic form or 'beauty' but always to marry the two, so that one informs the other. In doing so, the translator respects both the substantive and formal elements of the original and is true to the spirit of the poem. This quest for the spirit

[18] *Purgatorio*, 30.73-75, pp.514-5.
[19] *Purgatorio*, 30.n.73, p.525 and Is. 43.11 and 25.
[20] 'Introduction to Part I', *DHC*, p.1.
[21] 'Introduction to Part I', *DHC*, p.1.
[22] 'Preface to Early Italian Poets published 1861', *CW*, p.61.

of the poem indicates Rossetti's belief that it is in the interplay between surface and depth that authenticity is to be found. Far from rejecting an allegorical method then, Rossetti's process of translation and poetic innovation seems not only to require, but actively prescribe one.

The burden of literary inheritance would fall heavy on all the Rossetti children, but perhaps especially on Dante Gabriel, who was the natural successor to his father's scholarship at first glance by avoiding the *Commedia* altogether, and focusing exclusively on Dante's biography of his youth, *La Vita Nuova*. However, it is the contention of this thesis that contrary to prevailing critical assumptions, Rossetti's understanding of the aesthetics and theology of Dante's *Commedia* has been underestimated, and that this understanding informed his own poetry, particularly in its more theological inflections. Rossetti was extremely conversant with the *Commedia,* reporting in his sonnet of 1852 'On the 'Vita Nuova' of Dante' that he only sought out the *Vita Nuova* after being 'long bound within the threefold charm/ Of Dante's love sublimed to heavenly mood'.[23] Thus it seems to have been the case that it was Rossetti's initial adoration for the three cantiche of Dante's *Commedia* that kindled his interest in the *Vita Nuova*, yet as the numerous references to the *Commedia* in his poetry and painting demonstrate the 'charm' of the *Commedia* never dwindled for Rossetti.[24] Furthermore, in 'Dante at Verona' Rossetti demonstrates an acute awareness of the circular patterns of imagery that dominate Dante's composition of the *Commedia*:

> Each hour, as then the Vision pass'd,
> He heard the utter harmony
> Of the nine trembling spheres, till she
> Bowed her eyes towards him in the last,
> So that all ended with her eyes,
> Hell, Purgatory, Paradise.[25]

As such, contrary to Steve Ellis' claim that Rossetti's preoccupation with Beatrice 'leads him to falsify what happens […] at the end of *Paradiso*'[26], Rossetti faithfully renders not only the superstructure governing the *Commedia* but the minutiae of its imagery, which is something I will expand on in Chapter Two. William Michael

[23] 'On the "Vita Nuova" of Dante', *CW*, ll.5-6, p.220.
[24] 'Preface to Early Italian Poets published 1861', *CW*, p.61.
[25] 'Dante at Verona', *CW*, ll.415-420, p.216.
[26] Steve Ellis, 'Rossetti and the Cult of the *Vita Nuova*', in *Dante and English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.109.

recounts that as a teenage boy Rossetti 'took seriously to Dante *as the author of the Divina Commedia* [my emphasis]. He then read him eagerly, and with the profoundest admiration and delight; and from the *Commedia* he proceeded to the lyrical poems and the *Vita Nuova*'.[27]

Rossetti himself recalls the pervasive presence of the *Commedia* and Gabriele's scholarship on his imagination:

> The first associations I have are connected with my father's devoted studies, which, from his own point of view, have done so much towards the general investigation of Dante's writings. Thus, in those early days, all around me partook of the influence of the great Florentine; till, from viewing it as a natural element, I also, growing older, was drawn within the circle.[28]

For Rossetti, there is a fondness and nostalgia attached to his 'father's devoted studies' that makes it inevitable that he would take up his mantle – on his first visit to Charlotte Street, William Holman Hunt described encountering Gabriele and his group of 'escaped revolutionists' huddled around the fire debating the news of the day, in Italian or French, interspersed with a 'refrain of sighs and groans'.[29] There was a liveliness, buzz and energy that surrounded the Charlotte Street house, which Rossetti would recreate in the rambunctious spirit of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, surrounded as he often was by friends, admirers, fellow poets and artists all interested in bringing the past back to life, reviving the profound religious feeling and directness of fifteenth century Italian painting. Where Dante Gabriel would depart from his father's gregariousness was that he had made no friendships with Italians (aside from long-dead poets) and was on the whole indifferent to politics: political matters would seldom be discussed in his home as they had been in his parents. Rossetti wrote to Thomas Hall Caine in 1880:

> I must admit, at all hazards, that my friends here consider me exceptionally averse to politics; and I suppose I must be, for I never read a Parliamentary Debate in my life […] you must simply view me as a nonentity in any practical relation to such matters.[30]

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[27] William Michael Rossetti, 'Prefatory Note', *NL*, pp.5-6.
[28] 'Preface to Early Italian Poets published 1861', *CW*, pp.62-3.
[29] William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1913), I., p.108.
[30] *DMR*, pp.29-30.

Rossetti would dispense with Gabriele's political allegory, I argue, but not allegory altogether. Moreover, the project of recovering religious sentiments, experiences and rituals was not limited to Rossetti's painting. And I will argue in this thesis that, in his poetical works ranging from his 'Songs of the Art-Catholic' through to *The House of Life* and his longer poems, he experiments with the form of religious allegory that is, at least in part, derived from the mystical tradition that animates Dante's *Commedia*.

By extension then, in this thesis I will be investigating how we might understand Rossetti's works in terms of mystical theology, especially in its use of a double language of desire which both elevates human love and simultaneously humanizes God's love. Nowhere is the exaltation of such mystical expression more pronounced than in Rossetti's sonnet of 1871 'Heart's Hope'. It was initially intended to 'come first in the series'[31] of sonnets dedicated to Jane Morris in 1874 (the so-called Kelmscott Love sonnets) but which Rossetti would eventually integrate into his pre-existing sonnet-sequence *The House of Life* and publish in 1881 within *Ballads and Sonnets*. 'Heart's Hope' would retain its primary position as one of the first handful of sonnets in Part I, which as Rossetti indicates would 'treat of love'[32], and describes the speaker's inexpressible desire for his beloved as derived from 'one loving heart'[33]:

> By what word's power, the key of paths untrod,
> Shall I the difficult deeps of Love explore,
> Till parted waves of Song yield up the shore
> Even as that sea which Israel crossed dryshod?
> For lo! in some poor rhythmic period,
> Lady, I fain would tell how evermore
> Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor
> Thee from myself, neither our love from God.
>
> Yea, in God's name, and Love's, and thine, would I
> Draw from one loving heart such evidence
> As to all hearts all things shall signify;
> Tender as dawn's first hill-fire, and intense
> As instantaneous penetrating sense,
> In Spring's birth-hour, of other Springs gone by.[34]

[31] Wilmington, DE, Deleware Art Museum, Bancroft Collection, MS Heart's Hope, Box 22 < http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/2-1871.delms.radheader.html> [accessed 8 November 2019].
[32] 'Sonnets and Songs: Towards a Work to be Called "The House of Life"', *P*, p.188.
[33] 'Heart's Hope', *CW*, l.10, p.278.
[34] 'Heart's Hope', *CW*, ll.1-14, p.278.

God, by virtue of his (here embodied) heart, creates the circumstances for mankind to have the capacity for love. Such mystical oneness between man and God in 'Heart's Hope' is emblematical of a mystical dimension that can be seen running throughout Rossetti's poetry, in which God is depicted not as entirely beyond space, time and humanity but as permanently pervading and sustaining time, space and mankind. God is therefore inherent in all human relationships, including sexual ones, and as such Rossetti's poetry reveals and articulates this dynamic as a sexual desire simultaneously directed at the human beloved and God. As Ronnalie Roper Howard has argued, there is no convincing evidence that Rossetti the man was a traditional mystic (that is seeking to become absorbed into the absolute through contemplation and self-denial) though it is fair to say he uses traditional mystical expression, at least in some of his sonnets, and that this is a key dynamic in ensuring that many of his poems can make an affirmation of some kind of transcendent value in love.[35]

Joan Rees acknowledges a drive in Rossetti's poetry to fuse the body and soul in mystical union with God, and while she recognizes the importance of Dante to this facet of his work, she sees it as almost entirely unintellectual:

> The polar opposites of Rossetti's experiences, siren and pure love, mystic vision and sensual appetite, ecstasy and sense of sin, can all be traced to the impact of Dante and Dante's world upon his imagination. But though his imagination was coloured and moulded by that powerful influence, Rossetti in his time and country could not begin to accept the intellectual premises on which Dante's poetic structures are founded.[36]

Rees discounts the potential for Rossetti's engagement with, and interrogation of, mystical writings, viewing Rossetti's only route to them through a kind of impressionistic non-engagement: 'Dante's searing imagination which etched the images of his theology on to Rossetti's impressionable mind'.[37] While this is a welcome (and rather rare) critical recognition of the importance of Dante's mystical theology to Rossetti, Rees nevertheless fails to comprehensively account for the precise way in which Rossetti's expression recreates not only 'Dantean scenes'[38] but

[35] Ronnalie Roper Howard, *The Dark Glass: Vision and Technique in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1972), p.168.
[36] Joan Rees, 'The Importance of Dante', in *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of Self-Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 139.
[37] Rees, p.140.
[38] Rees, p.140.

a double language of desire that has existed for centuries throughout Christian scripture, theology and art.

Old Testament authors used a metaphor of marital sex and fertility to express God's covenant with the Hebrew people as an act of love, which also imaginatively lends itself to the story of their betrayal of Him. Most famously, the Song of Songs celebrates both conjugal love, and the unification of the nations of Israel, which led successive interpreters (Jewish and Christian) to view the poem as an allegory for God's holy matrimony with his chosen people.[39] Yet conversely, the parable of Hosea's marriage to Gomer, who proves to be unfaithful, stands for Israel's betrayal of their spouse – God – by resuming worship of false idols.[40] New Testament authors further employed nuptial desire to describe the Church as the bride betrothed to Christ, the bridegroom. The Gospel of John describes the defining characteristic of 'the Christ' as 'He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled'.[41] Paul, in Ephesians, urges Christians to emulate Christ's love for his Church by staying faithful to their dual spouses (Christ's Church and one's husband):

> Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is as the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing[42]

Nonetheless, as Paul and the other apostles began to disseminate the message of Christianity in the middle of the first century, they formulated an antagonism towards sexual desire.[43] In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul rails against the pagans who give into the lusts of the flesh, declaring that neither 'fornicators, nor idolators, nor

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[39] For a survey of the history of interpretations of the Song, see Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).
[40] Hosea, 1-2.
[41] John 3:29.
[42] Ephesians 5.22-5.
[43] Anna Clark, 'Divine Desire in Judaism and early Christianity', in *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 2008), p.39 and n.14 p.229. Historians have diverged in their opinions on when, precisely, a negative attitude to sex developed in Christian discourse. Some Protestant scholars, since the Reformation, have minimized Paul's antipathy to sex and glorification of celibacy, to conform to their own estimation of marriage. However, many modern historians believe that Paul's animosity to sex was present at the inception of Christianity. For historical accounts of Paul's negative attitude towards sexual pleasure, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism*, and Scripture in Early Christianity (Princeton, 1999) and Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners'[44] will obtain salvation, but will be punished by God. Neither does Paul portray sex within marriage positively, rather as a last resort (to prevent fornication), warning the unmarried who did not believe they could abstain that, it was 'better to marry than to burn'.[45]

The early Christians, such as Paul, clearly saw a stark difference between Christ's divine love and human erotic love, which was self-serving and perverse. Curbing sexual desire, through abstinence and marriage was vital to keep the body pure and yet Paul acknowledges how hard it is to resist: 'I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing'.[46] Although he urges the Corinthians to control their sexual desires, Paul understands that this requires a strength of will that most people will fall short of but also implies that sexual desire clouds the moral judgement and is ungovernable. Paul stresses that the fallenness of the flesh made it (and any pleasure to be had from it) inherently sinful, extolling the virtues of celibacy and begrudgingly (where unavoidable), its inferior equivalent, marriage. This is amplified in Augustine's writings, and later medieval commentaries, which depict sexual desire as a manifestation of human disobedience, that is original sin.[47]

Hence, while Old and New Testament writers are pre-original sin, and Paul adopts an antithesis towards using the imagery of marriage and sex in relation to God, sexual desire and the metaphor of marriage survives within the ascetic and mystical traditions. These traditions did not hesitate to make use of a visceral language of conjugal love to communicate their desire for God, and the pleasure of union with Him. The joyous nuptials of the Song of Songs become emblematical of a desire for the absolute, in this life, gained through personal experience.

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[44] 1 Corinthians 6.9-10.
[45] 1 Corinthians 7.8-9: 'I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn'.
[46] Romans 7.18-20.
[47] Alluding to Adam and Eve's banishment from Eden, he declared: 'When the first man transgressed the law of God, he began to have another law in his members which was repugnant to the law of his mind, and he felt the evil of his own disobedience when he experienced in the disobedience of his flesh a most righteous retribution recoiling on himself.' Augustine, 'On Marriage and Concupiscence', 1.7, *Internet Medieval Sourcebook,* <*https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/aug-marr.asp*> [accessed 10 November 2019].

Origen was the first Christian commentator to stress the Song of Songs as a 'marriage song'[48] that represented the matrimonial relationship between Christ and the Church. Origen's influence on subsequent exegesis of the Song was so strong that, as Roland Murphy suggests, even centuries later 'medieval interpretation of the Song consists largely of variations of Origenist themes'.[49] Origen's allegorical reading, which regards conjugal desire in the Song as the Bride's 'burning with heavenly desire for her bridegroom, who is the Word of God',[50] finds its most sustained development in the works of medieval abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux. The twelfth-century mystic had no compunction about using erotic rhetoric from the Song to expand Origen's allegory to include Christ and the human soul in his pioneering collection of sermons, *On the Song of Songs*. Bernard emphasizes the marriage of husband and wife as an allegory for the mystical union of the individual soul and God in more sensual terms than ever before. The original Song says:

> Set me as a seal upon thine heart,
> as a seal upon thine arm:
> for love *is* strong as death;
> jealousy *is* as cruel as the grave:
> the coals thereof *are* coals of fire,
> *which hath* a most vehement flame.
> Many waters cannot quench love,
> neither can the floods drown it[51]

As John Maynard suggests, it is not difficult to see what made Bernard of Clairvaux interpret the Song of Solomon in 'sensual, sexual terms'[52] in his sermons because this passage indicates a union with God that is plentiful, passionate and insatiable. Bernard suggests that those who open themselves to God will find not only their desire for spiritual unity but physical intimacy satisfied:

> It is my belief that to a person so disposed, God will not refuse that most intimate kiss of all, a mystery of supreme generosity and ineffable sweetness […] And finally, when we shall have obtained these favors through many prayers and tears, we humbly dare to raise our eyes to his mouth, so divinely beautiful, not merely to gaze upon it, but I say it with fear and trembling – to receive its kiss. "Christ the Lord is a Spirit before our face," and he who is

[48] Richard Alfred Norris, 'Origen', in *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 2.
[49] Richard Edmund Murphy et al. (eds), *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs* (Fortress Press, 1990), p.21.
[50] Norris, p. 2.
[51] Song of Solomon, 8:6-7.a
[52] John Maynard, *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.13.

> joined with him in a holy kiss becomes through his good pleasure, one spirit with him[53]

His intense focus on that 'most intimate kiss of all' and the physicality of Christ's mouth depict Him as a source of spiritual and physical gratification, transforming 'fear and trembling' into 'good pleasure' and delivering 'a mystery of supreme generosity and ineffable sweetness'. Bernard suggests that the believer experiences a kind of spiritual fascination or magnetism that draws them into acting as the receptacle for divine affection, placing themselves in a position not only of spiritual but also of sexual surrender. Only then does God appear as 'a Spirit before our face' so that the believer can consummate their spiritual union becoming 'one spirit with him'.
Mechtild of Magdeburg, a beguine and Christian medieval mystic wrote:

> And God said to the soul
> I desired you before the world began.
> I desire you now
> As you desire me.
> And where the desires of two come together
> There love is perfected.[54]

Such mystics articulated contemplation and prayer as union with God, in terms of sexual congress with a lover, and a rapturous, overwhelming sensory-overload. Another mystic schooled by the beguines, Beatrijs of Nazareth, suggested that when the soul is in mystic embrace with God it is:

> […] so utterly mastered and so tenderly embraced by love, that it entirely yields itself to love. And in this it experiences a great proximity to God, a spiritual radiance, a marvelous bliss, a noble freedom, an ecstatic sweetness, a great overpowering by the strength of love, and an overflowering abundance of immense delight. And then she feels that she is so deeply immersed and so engulfed in the abyss of love that she herself has turned entirely into love.[55]

She describes such mystical love making as the soul's bliss in surrender to the utter domination of God, who takes control of the self and in exchange offers unending 'love', 'bliss' and spiritual illumination. God gives the soul as much of His superabundance as it can bear and there is the sense that in doing so He dissolves the

[53] *OSOS*, I.3.5 (1971) pp.19-20.
[54] Monica Furlong, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1997), p.116.
[55] Furlong, p.105.

self away altogether until all that is left of the individual is the power of the 'love' that has overcome her. In love she was created and it is to love she returns, as 'love' itself.

However, as Anna Clark contends, this mystical desire begins to take on a peculiar tone when we consider that for the male believer to relate this intensely sexual poem to himself he 'had to imagine himself, as the beguines did, as the bride of Christ, putting himself in the feminine position'. [56] Such an interpretation might also be applied to the ritual of the Eucharist, becoming a vessel in order to receive Christ's body and blood. Surrounding this rhetoric of desire, then, is the spectre of sexual deviance and the transgression of traditional gender roles.

It is in this potential for sexual ambiguity in man's mystical unification with God that the figure of 'the beloved' comes into play. Dante employs Beatrice in his *Commedia* to act as a divine interlocuter, that is, as a Christ-like figure who safely diverts any potential gender-swapping back to a heteronormative desire that uses metaphors of courtly love to express the pilgrim's desire for God.[57] This averts the need for the pilgrim to take the passive, feminine role before God and enables him to reap the benefits of mystical union. It does however have the effect of rendering the lover helpless and exposed before the divine feminine. Rossetti's apotheosis of the beloved, I argue, takes Dante's Beatrice as a model, portraying the female figure as a site of the lover's desire for the ultimate, for an unknown God. In this reading, however, the beloved is always related to a potentially disruptive sexuality because Rossetti reveals that for the male lover to experience 'a great proximity to God' he must surrender his spiritual agency to the female beloved, and allow himself to be 'so utterly mastered and so tenderly embraced by love, that [he] entirely yields [himself] to love'. As reward the lover will receive 'that most intimate kiss of all' but this is possible only after 'many prayers and tears', that is after the soul-wringing experience of giving up everything he has in the pursuit of 'desire' and being 'desired' by the beloved. Only when the lover is ready, and the self is dissolved, will he be spiritually reborn and experience 'an ecstatic sweetness, a great overpowering by the strength of love'. Again, the erotic speech of Rossetti's 1871 sonnet, 'Heart's Hope' exemplifies this:

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[56] Clark, *Desire*, p.57.
[57] For Beatrice as Christ-like see Charles Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

'Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor/Thee from myself, neither our love from God.'[58] At the climax of the octave, Rossetti's speaker cannot distinguish between the sexual-spiritual love he finds with his beloved, and divine love – all subject-object relations have been collapsed 'entirely into love'. Rossetti's double language of desire mediates what Vittorio Montemaggi sees as the crucial divide between man and God in Dante's *Commedia*: 'between that which can be spoken *of* [the beloved] and that which is the ground of human speech and existence [God]'.[59] This is because Rossetti grounds what it means to talk about God (as unknowable, inherently mysterious, omnipresent yet hidden) in our understanding of loving human relationships. In doing so, Rossetti collapses the distinction between *eros* and *agape*, and exposes love itself as unknowable, mysterious, and divine. While Beatrice is Christ-like in the *Commedia*, Rossetti renders the beloved in his works as the entire horizon of divinity: at once the Father (unknowable, invisible and aloof), Christ (the Word, source of all revelation), the Holy Spirit (cause of spiritual agency in the world), Virgin Mary (divine intercessor on the lover's behalf) and Eve (femme fatale – threatening his salvation). In his artworks this duality is expressed through the inextricable link in Rossetti's imagination between his figure of the beloved and Dante's Beatrice. *The Blessed Damozel* (fig. 14) which illustrates the Imparadised beloved is perhaps the most obvious case in point for this. Beyond this work though Rossetti's oil painting *The Beloved* (fig.15) (which I will examine in detail, along with *The Blessed Damozel*, in Chapter Three) also starts its pictorial life as a painting of Beatrice and grows into an illustration of the Bride from the Song of Solomon. For Rossetti, all female figures seem to start their pictorial life as incarnations of Dante's Beatrice, for instance another of his oil paintings *The Bower Meadow* (fig.2) was intended to be a large-scale depiction of the meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Paradise yet by the time Rossetti takes up the project (twenty years on) his model Alexa Wilding (his Beatrice of choice for *The Blessed Damozel*) no longer 'turn[s] out to be a perfect Beatrice'[60] with Rossetti turning her into a generic and undifferentiated beloved – wistfully awaiting the arrival of her lover yet never certain he will appear.[61]

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[58] 'Heart's Hope', *CW*, ll.7-8, p.278.
[59] Vittorio Montemaggi, 'In Unknowability as Love: The Theology of Dante's Commedia', in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p.87.
[60] *Fredeman*, III.63.68, p.61.
[61] Museum label for Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Bower Meadow*, Manchester, Manchester Art Gallery, 13 March 2016.

Fig. 2 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Bower Meadow*, 1872. Manchester Art Gallery.

Rossetti's inconsistent method for choosing 'a *Beatrice*'[62] at any given time seems indicative less of his need to meet a particular set of aesthetic criteria and more of a need to satisfy his personal desire to recreate the myth of Dante and Beatrice in his own love life.

This drive to create a modern Dante and Beatrice finds its most sustained expression in Rossetti's courtship and marriage to Pre-Raphaelite muse and artist, Elizabeth Siddall. Biographical recollections tend to emphasise Siddall's ill-fated position in the coupling as eerily reprising the role of Dante's Beatrice, who offered the poet an unrequited love (because she died so tragically young and was married to someone else) he could immortalize in verse.[63] Certainly, Siddall's apparent aloofness, early death, burial with Rossetti's poems and subsequent morbid exhumation have provided numerous parallels to the love-story of Dante and Beatrice but also fertile ground for

[62] *Fredeman*, III.63.70, p.63.
[63] Julia Straub, 'Seeing Beatrice: The Visualization of Beatrice in Victorian Culture', in *A Victorian Muse: The Afterlife of Dante's Beatrice in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London: Continuum, 2009), p.33.

feminist critics such as Griselda Pollock and Deborah Cherry to argue in 'Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: The Representation of Elizabeth Siddall' that Rossetti erased Siddall's individuality to fashion an icon 'who functions as a sign of the genius of Dante Gabriel Rossetti'.[64] Transforming Siddall into *Beata Beatrix* (fig.11) and its artist into a Victorian Dante. Given how obsessively Rossetti illustrated Siddall as *Beata Beatrix* (at the moment in *La Vita Nuova* that Beatrice ascends to Heaven) between 1864-1880, in the years following Siddall's death (producing seven portraits in all and occupying an unrivalled space in his portraiture) it is tempting to see why. However, there is so much we cannot know about their relationship and the everyday reality of Siddall's life, addiction and marriage as we have few surviving letters in her hand and no diaries to testify to her experiences as she understood them – so it seems inevitable that in these historical gaps springs a kind of myth-making that encourages us to think about Siddall as a mere victim of love (or symbol of abused Victorian womanhood).[65]

Such a simplistic understanding of the relationship between Rossetti and Siddall, though, overlooks his nurturing of her artistic and poetic talent and his intuition that she was more than a specimen of ideal womanhood that the male artist could objectify, surpassing confinement as the artist's muse, and rendering her an unappreciated genius of her time. He wrote to William Allingham in 1954:

> It seems hard to me when I look at her sometimes, working or too ill to work, and think how many without one tithe of her genius or greatness of spirit have granted them abundant health and opportunity to labour through the little they can do or will do [...] How truly she may say, 'No man cared for my soul.' I do not mean to make myself an exception, for how long I have known her, and not thought of this till so late – perhaps too late.[66]

Confronted with Siddall's 'genius or greatness of spirit' and the heavy toll this would take on her physical and mental health Rossetti acknowledges and expresses a heartfelt regret at his failure – to adequately care for and champion his wife – displaying a deep-seated helplessness and inability to successfully be the lover, husband, mentor and

[64] Griselda Pollock and Deborah Cherry, 'Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: The Representation of Elizabeth Siddall' in *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.131-2.
[65] Serena Trowbridge, 'Inroduction', in *My Lady's Soul: The Poems of Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2018).
[66] *LDGR*, I, p.209.

devotee that he felt she deserved. This strong sense of inadequacy and self-chastisement pervades Rossetti's poetry (which I explore in detail in Chapter Three and Five) but also features in his depiction of *Beata Beatrix* (1872). It is in the replica that Rossetti produced for William Graham that we find his sharpening and solidifying of the connection between this episode in *La Vita Nuova* with the reunion of Dante and Beatrice in Eden in *Purgatorio* (a subject I discuss at length in Chapter Two). Significantly, Rossetti includes a predella that depicts this reunion as Dante prostrating himself before Beatrice and an ominous heavenly host, which looms reproachfully over him. This work indicates Rossetti's desire to be rightly chastened by his beloved for his inconstancy and reveals that the space the beloved occupies in his aesthetic is multifaceted, drawing from Dante's representation of Beatrice as Christ-like (the ultimate arbiter of his sins). As such, my analysis of Rossetti's construction of the beloved goes some way to reframe the relationship between the artist and his models, by showing how their seeming passivity, silence and inscrutability are symptoms of their divine status.

Counter to feminist and psychoanalytic approaches to Rossetti's poetry, which see Rossetti's response to Dante as a male fantasy of a desire to subjugate and fetishize the female body, [67] I will argue, that while these approaches are useful as a means of exposing subject-object relations between the male artist and female subject, these approaches are not the sole way of viewing the lover's relationship with the beloved in Rossetti's aesthetic. By reading Dante's *Commedia* as a key influence and alongside Rossetti's poems, I seek to assert that 'the beloved' in Rossetti's works is a theologically complex figure of divinity, or at least the gateway to divinity. It is consciously designed to help refigure our understanding of Rossetti's relationship with the female figure, highlighting the precarious and subordinate position not of the subject, but of the *lover*; a lover who is dependent upon the beloved's acceptance or rejection, and who through the transforming power of her grace may or may not grant the lover the opportunity for mystical union with God. Reading Dante and Rossetti together in this way provides a corrective to the many readings of the female figure in

[67] See Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Case Study. Wife to Mr Rossetti Elizabeth Siddall', in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp.168-180 and Suzanne Waldman, 'Hysterical Desire in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Narrative Poems and Portraiture', in *The Demon and the Damozel: Dynamics of Desire in the Works of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), pp.118-153.

Rossetti's works as a mostly amenable vessel for the lover's desires and thereby ripe for manipulation (from Christina's 'In An Artist's Studio' onwards). But the beloved can also be God-like: in her self-containment, her evasiveness and unknowability. It is the complex nature of her theological position, derived from medieval mystical theology via Dante, that may at least in part lie behind these qualities in Rossetti's work.

In poetic moments of mystical union, human bodies collide, melt away and resolve into spirit, united with the everlasting. Nowhere more does Rossetti emphasize the spiritual and sexual satisfaction to be found through a physical union with the beloved than in his 1871 sonnet 'Mid-Rapture' (1871). Another of the Kelmscott Love sonnets, its title plays on the double meaning of 'rapture' as signifying the intense delight and enthusiasm of sexual passion, and its eschatological sense, which implies a time when the elect will gather with Christ in Heaven at Parousia. Rossetti's speaker directly experiences his beloved's touch, glance and voice while in the throes of passion, as the infinite love of God (personified by the dove or Holy Spirit):

> Thou lovely and beloved, thou my love;
> Whose kiss seems still the first; whose summoning eyes,
> Even now, as for our love-world's new sunrise
> Shed very dawn; whose voice, attuned above,
> All modulation of the deep-bowered dove,
> Is like a hand laid softly on the soul[68]

The beloved's 'kiss' offers not just tenderness or physical consolation but transports the lover upwards into direct contact with 'the deep-bowered dove' and 'the love-world' – the place in which 'love is perfected'[69] and becomes all-encompassing. While in the moments before sexual encounter in 'Love-Sweetness' (1870), the speaker reveals his desire for spiritual intimacy as greater than his beloved's physical charms:

> What sweeter than these things, except the thing
> In lacking which would lose their sweet: –
> The confident heart's still fervour: the swift beat
> And soft subsidence of the spirit's wing,
> Then when it feels, in cloud-girt wayfaring,

[68] 'Mid-Rapture', *CW*, ll.1-6, p.289.
[69] Furlong, p.116.

The breath of kindred plume against its feet?[70]

Rossetti's speaker yearns for sexual-spiritual union with the divine, seeking satisfaction in the insatiable and finding in his beloved's 'tremulous smiles' and 'kisses' that his ultimate desire is never satisfied but continually kindled.

Perhaps most famously, in 'The Blessed Damozel' (1870), the beloved unveils her original desire not to simply be reunited with her earthbound lover but also (and at the same time) to be reunited with God – signalling a return to Eden, the place from which all creation springs:

I'll take his hand and go with him
  To the deep wells of light;
As unto a stream we will step down,
  And bathe there in God's sight. […]

'We two will lie i' the shadow of
  That living mystic tree
Within whose secret growth the Dove
  Is sometimes felt to be,
While every leaf that His plumes touch
  Saith His Name audibly.[71]

The beloved imagines the culmination of her desire to draw her lover heavenwards as the submerging or ritual baptism of both in the eternal vision of God – so that all yearning and perception is cleansed and reconciled to a single 'secret' purpose. The point at which body and spirit meet is externalized in 'That living mystic tree' which may refer to the tree of life or tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden. However, no longer is this site a source of a Pauline conflict for humanity (forced to choose between eternal life or death; obedience or the burden of freedom) because the lovers 'lie' in comfort under its shade, serene and unencumbered – close to the Holy Spirit that generates and moves all creation and hears its praise returned to Him.

In Rossetti's poetry then spiritual rapture clearly shares the same vocabulary as the bliss of romantic love. It often vacillates between a longing for unification with the beloved, for intense physical pleasure and the self-emptying experience of leaving one's body altogether, surpassing the here and now – and the fear that this desperate

[70] 'Love-Sweetness', *CW*, ll.9-14, p.286.
[71] 'The Blessed Damozel', *CW*, ll.75-90, pp.13-14.

yearning will never be satiated or returned, the feeling that this singular love must be kept hidden, private and undisclosed as well as the sensations of trembling and restlessness.

Such highly stylized language, detectable in both Rossetti and medieval mystical theology, does not appear in a vacuum. Rather it will be the contention of this thesis that Rossetti's mystical expression can and should be traced back to Rossetti's exposure to (and sometimes fraught relationship with) the aesthetics and theology of Dante's *Commedia*, which is itself formed out of a dialogue with the mystic tradition in both medieval and patristic theology. The mystics who populate Dante's *Paradiso* – Augustine, Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux and others – consistently employ an erotic language that reappears in the sonnets of *The House of Life*, the subjects of Rossetti's paintings, and in much of his poetry. Rossetti did not encounter this mystical expression exclusively through the *Commedia,* but undoubtedly its presentation in Dante's seminal work was a key influence on both Rossetti's understanding and representation of the soul's relationship to God, and also of the lover's analogous relationship with the beloved, from its most strained to its most ecstatic moments.

Even in his translation of *La Vita Nuova* Rossetti cannot help but recall the significance that this relationship yields for the *Commedia*, for when Dante describes his relationship with Beatrice as '"I am the centre of the circle, to which all parts of the circumference bear an equal relation, but with thee it is not thus"' Rossetti interprets this decentring of Dante as a recognition that 'all loveable objects, whether in heaven or earth […] are equally near to [him]. Not so thou, who wilt one day lose Beatrice when she goes to Heaven'.[72] Rossetti suggests that Beatrice transcends Dante's sphere of influence, and thus that she exceeds him. This is something he experiences here only as a feeling, but which will be confirmed by her 'death' and his arduous journey in the *Commedia* to re-centre himself with her – and God's – loving embrace. The journey that Rossetti's lover makes is a psychological one through his burgeoning realisation that his fear of damnation and hope of redemption relies on his proximity to the open arms of his beloved: 'My worshipping face, til I am mirrored

[72] *NL*, pp.48-49.

there/ Light-circled in a heaven of deep-drawn rays'[73] and his hope against hope that at the end of it all 'the one Hope's one name be there'[74] that is the 'the name of Beatrice' which, as Rossetti specifically highlights, 'is *Love*'.[75] Dante's conceptions of hell, earthly and heavenly paradises; despair and hope; eros and agape; inarticulacy and linguistic harmony – all informed Dante Gabriel Rossetti's conceptions of this world and the hereafter as well as his idealized erotic language. For Rossetti, art and theology both often tend to converge around a single point: that is the soul's harmonious or disharmonious relation to its beloved – Beatrice or Christ, human lover or the love of God.

Getting personal: Rossetti and the Anglo-Catholics

A resurgence of interest in mystical writings, and a reverence for the early Church Fathers, was of course galvanized in the early- and mid- nineteenth century by the rise of Anglo-Catholicism. In 1839, Newman published a tract by John Cosin on the Eucharist in which Cosin argues that the interaction between human and divine can only be reconciled by looking no further than Bernard of Clairvaux did:

> […] for if with St. Bernard and the Fathers a man goes no further, we do not find fault with a general explication of the manner, but with the presumption and self-conceitedness of those who boldly and curiously inquire what is a spiritual presence, as presuming that they can understand the manner of acting of GOD's Holy Spirit. We contrariwise confess with the Fathers that this […] is unaccountable, and past finding out […] by reason, but believed by faith[76]

As Charles Stephen Dessain has argued, Bernard has been perceived as the last in a long line of Church Fathers who stress mystical contemplation on Scripture as the key to Christian faith, a theological practice which Newman's own writings seem to resurrect:

> St. Bernard is called the last of the Fathers because in him dogma and piety and literature are still one […] Newman, who leaves later developments on one side, took over where St. Bernard left off, and perhaps should be allowed to succeed to his title. [77]

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[73] 'Mid-Rapture', *CW*, ll.11-12, p.289.
[74] 'The One Hope', *CW*, ll.13, p.325.
[75] 'Introduction to part 1', *DHC*, n, p.4.
[76] John Cosin, 'The History of Popish Transubstantiation', in *Tracts for the Times* ed. by John Henry Newman et al., (London: Gilbert and Rivington, 1839), I, no.27, p.11.
[77] Charles Stephen Dessain, 'Newman's Spirituality: Its Value Today', in *English Spiritual Writers*, ed. Charles Davis (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), p.160.

Bernard's writings received renewed literary and theological attention and adaptation in the 1840s, with an increasing number of English translations being produced from that time. From the plethora of anonymous translations of Bernard's four homilies *super 'Missus est'* published consecutively in 1843, 1867, 1886, and 1909 to translations of his entire theological corpus proposed by Tractarian cleric Frederick Oakley and Professor John Sherran Brewer of King's College London, interest in Bernard's works was at an all-time high.[78]

As theologian David N. Bell argues the sudden proliferation of translations of Bernard's writings correlates with the rise of the Oxford Movement, which brought with it

> a renewal of theological scholarship, a renaissance of interest in the church's patristic and medieval foundations, […] a reintroduction of […] romanticism and enthusiasm […] the formation and reformation of a multitude of religious orders, most of them Anglican, and among many, a great revival of interest in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.[79]

Translating Bernard's complete works attracted all manner of Anglican clergy, including the Reverend William Balmbro Flower, chaplain and patristic scholar, who translated a selection of forty-six of Bernard's sermons as *Sermons for the Seasons of the Church* in 1861.[80] Samuel J. Eales, Vicar of Stalisfield in Kent, also published the first volume of his translation of Bernard's life and works in 1889 (another intended translation of Bernard's complete works, including letters and sermons) that remained the only available English translation of these works for the next fifty years.[81]

Amongst these translators was Rossetti's friend and Catholic convert, Coventry Patmore and his wife Marianne Caroline, who translated St. Bernard's *On Loving God* as *St. Bernard on the Love of God* in 1881.[82] Rossetti's childhood experiences of

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[78] For a comprehensive survey of translations of Bernard in the nineteenth century, see David N. Bell, ' "In Their Mother Tongue": A Brief History of the English Translation of Works by and Attributed to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: 1496-1970', in *The Joy of Learning and the Love of God*: Studies in Honour of Jean Leclercq ed. by E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo, 1995), pp.293-294.
[79] Bell, p.296.
[80] See Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons for the Seasons of the Church*, trans. by Rev. William B. Flower (London: Joseph Masters, 1861).
[81] See Bernard of Clairvaux, *Life and Works of Saint Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux,* trans. by Samuel J. Eales (London: John Hodges 1889-96).
[82] *St. Bernard on the Love of God*, trans by Marianne Caroline Patmore and Coventry Patmore (London: Kegan Paul, 1881).

Anglo-Catholic services, participation in household prayers, and exposure to Roman Catholic poets (Dante, Boccaccio, Forese Donati and others) were a strong formative influence and unique for a painter-poet of his time.[83] He was well-versed in the Bible, and as Jan Marsh points out 'Job, Ecclesiastics and Revelation were his favourite books'.[84] Notably, it is the narratives of suffering, judgement and mystical visions of the apocalypse that most vividly captured Rossetti's imagination.

From 1843 onwards, Rossetti's mother and his sisters Maria and Christina, regularly attended Christ Church in Albany Street, a hub of religious piety, which was presided over first by William Dodsworth (a strong Puseyite and later Roman Catholic convert) and then Henry William Burrows, who recounted of the parish at this time: 'It was a time of fervour and revival of church principles and it is not too much to say that Christ Church became the leading church in the movement'.[85] Rossetti occasionally attended services and thought highly of Burrows, writing in a letter to Christina in 1853:

> Sunday night Maria and I went to see Mr. Burrows after attending service at his church. I liked him very well, but he rather reminded me of Patmore in manner. The decorations at Christ Church are very poor —four gilt Corinthian capitals; item, one pulpit-cloth with seven white stars, etc. etc.[86]

Rossetti habitually found himself befriending and finding common ground with men of faith;[87] his mention of Patmore, emphasizes how Rossetti consciously or unconsciously surrounded himself with those who shared his religious sensibilities, if not his unorthodox scepticism of doctrine. His distaste for Christ Church's sparse adornment provides a striking counterpoint to his reaction on a previous trip to Boulogne almost ten years before. On that occasion, Rossetti had declared in a letter to his brother that the splendour of religious architecture, ritual and music he had come into contact with would have been enough to incite even the most pious Protestant to convert to Catholicism:

> The evening before last Mr. Maenza and I walked about the principal church of the town during mass or vespers or whatever they call it. What between the fine old Gothic interior, adorned with pictures and images of saints—the music

[83] See Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p.26.
[84] Marsh, p.27.
[85] Quoted in Emma Mason, *Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.40.
[86] *FLM*, II, p.122.
[87] His friendships with Catholic converts James Collinson and Coventry Patmore, and devout Methodist James Smetham are documented in Rossetti's letters, see *FLM* and *Fredeman*.

> and the chanting—the magnificent groups of old fishwomen, whose intense devotion has in it something sublime—and the "dim religious light" of the lamps placed against the Gothic pillars, which glimmered faintly up and struggled through the gathering darkness—the scene was so solemn and impressive that Maria (whom I wished for much) might have gone a Protestant, but would most certainly have returned a Catholic.[88]

Even the fishwomen become 'magnificent' in this environment, evoking a sense of 'intense devotion' of the 'sublime […] solemn and impressive', sentiments that clearly animated his work. As Emma Mason points out, he based much of his manuscript 'Songs of the Art-Catholic' on the art and architecture he found there.[89]

Christ Church also brought Rossetti into contact with James Collinson, a painter turned Catholic convert. As his biographer Jan Marsh observes, the early years of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood coincided with Rossetti's aesthetic sensibility and ideas becoming noticeably 'Romanish'[90] under the influence of Collinson:

> [in 1848] Collinson was working on a long poem on the childhood of Christ, with incidents emblematical of the 'five sorrowful mysteries' of the Atonement. At Christ Church, he had been conspicuous for his piety, and now he had 'gone over' to Rome, a convert to the high devotionalism in the footsteps of Cardinal Newman […] in all probability James was the source of the 'symbolic accessorises' in the *Girlhood* [*of Mary Virgin*], such as the pile of books inscribed with the Marian virtues and the emblematic palm and thorn.[91]

Collinson would later contribute his poem 'The Child Jesus' – inspired by John Keble's *The Christian Year* – with an accompanying etching for inclusion in the second issue of *The Germ* in 1850.[92] Indeed, Holman Hunt recalled that during these early days, Collinson even tried to convert Rossetti to Roman Catholicism, to no avail, because Rossetti was 'always resistant to dogma' ('mass or vespers or whatever they call it'); that is, like his father Gabriele, he was deeply anti-authoritarian, preferring to remain unconfined and free to change his mind as it suited him.

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[88] *FLM*, II, p.24.
[89] Mason, p.75.
[90] Marsh, p.46.
[91] Marsh, p.46.
[92] James Collinson, 'The Child Jesus', *The Germ*, 31 January 1850, p.49.

Fig. 3 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1849. Tate Gallery, London.

However, as Marsh points out, Rossetti's unorthodoxy did not render a charade his hope that *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (fig.3) would appeal to 'members of a Christian community'.[93] More it was a sign of the times – of his saturation in the Catholicism of his literary (medieval) forefathers or near-Catholicism of his closest companions. As Marsh says:

> If [Rossetti] employed sacred emblems partly in a spirit of romance, prompted by his liking for things arcane, he also responded to a religion of mystery and symbol, which Dante and his companions had shared. Temperamentally, he preferred faith to facts and doctrines of confession and absolution to rigorous English moralism.[94]

Rossetti was surrounded by Anglo-Catholicism (and Catholicism) on all sides but he also always retained a curiosity, if not actually a type of obsession, on matters of religion and the spiritual world.

[93] Marsh, p.46.
[94] Marsh, p.46.

William Michael Rossetti addresses the question of Dante Gabriel's religious beliefs in his 1895 *Memoir*:

> As to my brother's reported assertion "I believe in a future life," this was partially true at all periods of his career and was entirely true in his closing years. It depended partly upon what we call "spiritualism," on many of whose manifestations he relied, while ready to admit that some others have been mere juggling. In November 1879 I found that his mind was much occupied with spiritualism, and that he was then fully convinced, or re-convinced, of immortality; and I am sure that from this belief he never afterwards receded.[95]

William Michael observes that while Dante Gabriel's views were seldom consistent or comprehensive, his brother did hold a belief, however 'vague', in the hereafter and of the soul's endurance after death. As such, the beliefs he expresses, according to William Michael, are at least broadly compatible with the Anglo-Catholicism which was so marked a feature of his upbringing.

An obsessive streak to this interest is noted by William Holman Hunt, who recalled an early encounter in 1848 in which Dante Gabriel instigated a lively religious debate:

> "Tell me," Gabriel next asked, "do you really believe in the devil?" And then followed a talk (at intervals somewhat rollicking) on spiritual mysteries, which are now quite beside the mark.
>
> In sober moments we had agreed that orthodox religionists made such claims to entrammel judgment, conscience, and will, that they drove thinking men to the extreme alternative of throwing away all faith in divine over-rule; yet on whichever side we argued we were merely testing how far our theories would bear the strain of life. Each position that we held was a sincere one for the time, whatever was the standpoint assumed. I felt debarred from painting subjects not in accordance with my position, as much as I should have been in making declarations against my conscience. For Rossetti, the fact that so many modern poets had been defiant, captivated him with revolt, while the precedent of the older poets and artists in song and design encouraged the ecclesiastical strain of work he favoured; supremacy of genius alone taxed his loyalty, and perfection in Art was synonymous in his mind with the amplest Wisdom. Yet beneath all his discordant phases of profession he still cherished the habits of thought he had contracted at his mother's knee, and I do not think he altogether cast away the gentle yoke in later years. [96]

Hunt reveals Rossetti's enthusiasm for an unorthodox but pragmatic approach to theology that 'would bear the strain of life'. Hence, Hunt suggests that Rossetti's

[95] *FLM*, I, pp.380-1.
[96] Hunt, pp.116-7.

views on religion emphasized the individual's experience, freedom and right to inconsistency, and explicitly recognizes in Rossetti a dynamic of revolt and discipline, youthful rebellion and mature conservatism, but that is still taking place within a recognizably religious framework.

From what can be gathered from his correspondence, Rossetti rarely spoke openly about his own religious outlook and always approached the topic with reticence and caution. When his friend James Smetham, a devout Methodist and artist, writes of Rossetti's medieval watercolours as the greatest modern expression of 'the Christian ideal'[97] in December 1865 however, Rossetti feels obliged to offer a measured account of his own middling position:

> I had better tell you frankly at once that I have no such faith as you have. Its default in me does not arise from want of natural impulse to believe, nor of reflection whether what I should alone call belief in a full sense is possible to me. Thus I know that while discussion on such points with a believer is painful to me […] and I abstain from it absolutely. I feel this plain statement due to such sincerity as yours, though I do not ordinarily feel bound to explain myself at all on this matter […] what I have felt it my duty to say here ; of which I neither wish to mitigate the significance, nor to declare myself thereby a confident denier – still less an apostle of opposition. This is all I feel able to say on the subject. [98]

What is striking here is not Rossetti's agnosticism or indifference but his emotional struggle with faith. In bringing up the question of his belief, Smetham seems to have hit a raw nerve. This is because in comparison with Smetham's 'sincerity' that is his certainty and integrity Rossetti finds his own belief coming up short, feeling a 'painful' sense of inadequacy amongst the faithful, and reluctant to commit one way or the other.

This seems, however to be a mis-diagnosis or at least a category error on Rossetti's part. He indicates to Smetham that sincerity or steadfastness are basic values of the religious sense, with the expectation that believers will continually reaffirm or vigilantly hold fast to their faith. Yet Rossetti does express belief, albeit of a deeply

[97] James Smetham, *Letters of James Smetham*, ed. by Sarah Smetham and William Davies (London: Macmillan and Co., 1902), p.103.
[98] *Fredeman*, III. 65.177, pp.357-8.

insecure kind, in which he reveals that he is inclined by the 'natural impulse to believe' and worries whether a 'full', complete and consistent belief will ever belong to him. Rossetti is adamant, however, that he is not 'an apostle of opposition'. Even the terms of his declaration still operate within a Christian framework because 'apostle' recalls one of the twelve disciples of Christ, whom Rossetti implicitly endorses by refusing to stand in 'opposition' against them. Hence, Rossetti hints that he does possess a belief, a wavering belief that is unsure of itself and yet is grounded in emotion and not altogether abandoned.

Rossetti certainly never declared himself an atheist, and vehemently denied any such accusation. Hall Caine recalled that 'I once saw him very indignant on hearing that he had been accused of irreligion, or rather of not being a Christian. He asked with great earnestness, "Do not my works testify to my Christianity?"'.[99] Rossetti also cautioned against Swinburne's proposal to publish some blasphemous verses, declaring that while he himself was free from dogmatic belief,

> […] I do myself feel that that supreme nobility of Christ's character should exempt it from being used – not as a symbolic parallel to other noble things and persons in relation with which dogmatists might object to its use – but certainly in contact of this kind with anything so utterly ignoble as this. I should feel myself to breath more freely in the splendid atmosphere of your genius if this cloud were cleared away from it; & feeling so, a friend should say so.[100]

Rossetti thus positions himself as an interrogator of Christian dogma, yet his defensiveness here reveals him to be a sympathizer for what he saw as the inherent 'nobility' of its key figures and tenets. He clearly believed that his emotional assent to Christianity as well as his devotional artwork (suffused with Christian symbolism) could operate as a declaration of faith at some level. William Michael clearly distinguishes between a kind of 'strict doctrinal' Christianity based on accepting Church teachings and practising observances on the one hand, and the constitution of his brother's faith on the other: that was 'a reverence for a Christian ideal and delight in Christian legend and symbol'.[101] Such difference engrossed the Victorian religious imagination: was it possible to be a Christian without attending services or affirming

[99] Thomas Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Eliot Stock, 1882), pp.39-40.
[100] *Fredeman*, IV.70.153, p.483.
[101] *FLM*, I, p.408.

doctrine? Rossetti's mother and sisters remained unconvinced, believing that this strange form of vacillating 'reverence' would prevent him from attaining salvation.[102] On her deathbed, Maria Francesca urged her brothers to embrace Christianity, revealing that one of her motives for joining the Sisterhood was to obtain for them the 'grace of conversion'.[103] Significantly, William Michael sidestepped the issue by suggesting that he thought Rossetti was a better bet for conversion than himself.[104]

Yet the question of how to grant theological legitimacy to emotional inclination is itself a theological one. As the philosopher John Cottingham has argued, the problem with discourses surrounding the acceptance of religious belief is that believers are criticized 'in terms of intellectual assent to a set of theses or doctrines'[105] completely overlooking the role of emotion in informing belief, which is 'taken to be largely irrelevant background 'pulp' or 'mush' of emotive, poetic, narrative, and symbolic elements'[106]. By contrast, Robert Stocker, amongst others, has held that emotional states, like pity and anger, can have a fundamental function in guiding and concentrating our attention, so that our emotions profoundly affect our perception of things: 'they seek out and collect, even create, sustaining or concordant facts […] which they then use to justify and sustain that emotion, which then leads to further seeking, collecting, creating and coloring'[107]. Newman addresses this in *An Essay in Aid of the Grammar of Assent* in which he puts the role of the emotions on an equal, if not superior, footing with a doctrinal understanding of religious principles.[108] Newman demonstrates that assent based solely on doctrine cannot motivate or command the attention of the believer, neither is a purely cognitivist approach to understanding faith comprehensive:

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[102] For appeals for DGR's conversion: see *Books from the libraries of Christina, Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti*, ed. by William E. Fredeman (London: Betram Rota, 1973) lot 37 (Rossetti's mother praying for her sons to be 'brought to Confirmation' and 'Spiritual Communion' with God) and Dinah Roe, *The Rossettis in Wonderland* (London: Haus, 2011), pp.292-3.
[103] See Weintraub, p.215 and Roe, pp.292- 3.
[104] Roe, p.292.
[105] John Cottingham, 'Religion and Language: emotion, symbol and facts', in *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.79.
[106] Cottingham, pp.79-80.
[107] Robert Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.94. See Mark Wynn 'The Relationship of Religion and Ethics: A Comparison of Newman and Contemporary Philosophy of Religion', in *Heythrop Journal*, XLVI, 2005, pp. 435–449 and *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding: Integrating Perception, Conception and Feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[108] For Newman's influence on Rossetti, see Zaynub Zaman, '*The Passion: the influence of the High Church on Rossetti's Aestheticism*' in Pre-Raphaelite Studies Review, XXVII, 2, Autumn, 2019.

> I can understand the rabbia of a native of Southern Europe, if I am of a passionate temper myself; and the taste for speculation or betting found in great traders or on the turf, if I am fond of enterprise or games of chance; but on the other hand, not all the possible descriptions of headlong love will make me comprehend the delirium, if I never have had a fit of it [109]

Significantly for this thesis, Newman proposes both that in order to acquire an authentic image of love the subject needs to have undergone a direct and appropriate, emotional experience that may not be capturable in language, and that analogously to acquire a real image of God entails a direct and appropriate emotional experience which operates in a similar way.

Indeed, his emotionally-charged language is telling:

> when inferences are exercised on things, they tend to be conjectures or presentiments without logical force; and when assents are exercised on notions, they tend to be mere assertions without any personal hold on them on the part of those who make them. [110]

He implies that inference alone lacks the emotional vigour, 'force' or capacity to 'hold' the believer, rendering their resultant convictions vacuous: 'conjectures […] presentiments […] and […] mere assertions' suggesting that these views lack any kind of foundation, rational or practical and collapse into mere speculative affirmations.

Thus, Newman's account, from within the heart of orthodox Anglo-Catholicism, leaves space for the idea that is that there is a primal emotional response to God which motivates the construction of doctrine, for example when we reflect on the truth of a proposition, so that faith derives from a kind of emotional layering – emotions prompt reflection and reorient the way we consider doctrines and theses that then leads to the uptake of beliefs which are deepened further by emotional experience. Thus, we are left with an intricate complex of emotions that rely on abstraction and vice versa.

It is perhaps useful then to see Rossetti's poems and paintings in the context not only of a medieval religio-mystical tradition around desire mediated to him in large part through his reading of Dante, but of the nineteenth-century revival of interest in patristic and medieval thinking that surrounded him. Both engage with the working

[109] John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of the Grammar of Assent* (New York: Catholic Publication Society, 1870), pp.26-7.
[110] Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, p.38.

out of a belief that is never fully formed but is always in a process of becoming, and which thinks in detail about the role of emotionality and desire as a principle of religious belief. In this, Rossetti's vacillation between the possibility of redemption and utter despair, his paradoxical attitude to faith and his struggle to contend with the moral and emotional framework it implicitly endorses, seems like it might actually be part of a quite unexpected tradition.

Rossetti's religious beliefs were unorthodox, at times inconsistent and riven with doubt – yet, they were, I contend, theologically informed. What remains through his undulating and contradictory statements is a perpetual fear of eternal damnation and hope for the possibility of redemption. Close friend and artist, William Bell Scott labelled him an 'agnostic',[111] which belies not only his well-informed, and nuanced understanding and treatment of Christianity, but fails to account for his repeated assertions of a belief in the afterlife and his attraction to High Church ritual and decoration. Indeed, William Michael details in his *Memoir* how Scott 'erroneously' feels compelled, near the end of Rossetti's life, to remind his brother of his 'extreme agnosticism' – even as Rossetti calls for a confessor to rid him of his sins.[112] Despite William Michael's desire to correct Scott's simplistic view of his brother, which 'only took account of one half of [Rossetti's] mind' he also continually reaffirms this portrayal of Rossetti as a religious cynic, without the 'faintest taste' or 'aptitude' for 'theological discussions', even as he recounts,

> [Rossetti] had an abiding and very deep reverence of the person of Christ. I recollect that one evening – it may have been late in 1879 – he wound up a conversation with me on this subject by saying, in a tone of decisive conviction, "Certainly He was something more than man."[113]

William Michael declares his brother 'was not a man of self-consistency in either opinion or act'[114], yet he seems to be unaware of his own glaring inconsistencies. He begrudges Scott for calling Rossetti an agnostic, but then seems determined to do so himself by any other name and denies his brother's ability to engage in theological discourse while recalling a 'conversation' in which his brother expresses his 'conviction' of the superhuman nature of Christ.

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[111] *FLM*, I, p.379.
[112] *FLM*, I, pp.378-80.
[113] *FLM*, I, p.380.
[114] *FLM,* I, p.380

Throughout Rossetti's life, there was usually lively discussion about religious matters, and curiosity as to each other's religious leanings. In a letter to Hall Caine in March 1880 Rossetti apologetically enquires whether his friend is a 'Roman Catholic'[115]. Hall Caine responds with a thorough account of his religious practices, enthusiastically proclaiming:

> I'm not a Catholic, God knows, and yet I feel the beauty of Catholicism in the abstract: I feel too the other beauty of Protestantism, and indeed I feel that they have between these two a beauty in common which should make them allies. I heard a positivist sermon on Sunday and thought with Emerson if Luther had but known what his act would lead to, he would have cut off his right hand rather than nail up his theses.[116]

Hall Caine may be protesting too much, that he is decidedly not Catholic, however, what is clear is that he and Rossetti share an appreciation for the 'beauty of Catholicism' and a 'sympathy' for the unorthodox in religious belief. Hall Caine's extreme aversion to 'positivist sermon[s]' is significant because it exemplifies this unorthodox orthodoxy. Auguste Comte, founder of positivism, denounced all propositions not empirically verifiable (including metaphysical, religious or ethical statements) leading him to deny the existence of a personal God. However, he tried to recruit the structure and rhetoric of Christianity into a new religion, by construing 'Humanity'[117], that 'Great Being'[118], as the new object of its adoration and worship. As Hall Caine emphasizes, vacillating between Catholicism and Protestantism was one thing because it still kept one within the acceptable and recognisable limits of a Christian framework, even if one is in revolt from it – however positivism, in blurring the boundaries of what a religion or a religious feeling is and then embodying them institutionally, went beyond the pale.

In his *Recollections*, Hall Caine recalled that the review of Rossetti's *Poems* that gave his friend the greatest satisfaction, which Rossetti praised in April 1880 as an 'article […] of a very masterly kind and by some very scholarly mind'[119] and saw fit to share with Caine, was published by the *Catholic World* of New York. Hall Caine recounts:

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[115] *DMR*, p.53.
[116] *DMR*, p.63.
[117] Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism* trans. by J. H. Bridges (London: Routledge, 1908), p.365.
[118] Comte, p.377.
[119] *DMR*, p.80.

> He [Rossetti] sent me the article, and I found it, as he had found it, among the best things written on the subject. Naturally, the criticism was best where the subject dealt with impinged most upon the spirit of mediæval Catholicism. Perhaps Catholicism is essentially mediæval, and perhaps a man cannot possibly be, what the *Catholic World* article called Rossetti, a "mediæval artist heart and soul," without partaking of a strong religious feeling that is primarily Catholic – so much were the religion and art of the middle ages knit each to each […] Years later, when I came to know Rossetti personally, I perceived that the writer of the article in question had not made a bad shot for the truth. True it was, that he had inherited a strong religious spirit – such as could only be called Catholic – inherited I say, for, though from his immediate parents, he assuredly did not inherit any devotion to the Madonna, his own submission to religious influences was too unreasoning and unquestioning but to be anything but intuitive. Despite some worldly-mindedness, and a certain shrewdness in the management of the more important affairs of daily life, Rossetti's attitude towards spiritual things was exactly the reverse of what we call Protestant. During the last months of his life, when the prospect of leaving the world soon, and perhaps suddenly, impressed upon his mind a deep sense of his religious position, he yielded himself up unhesitatingly to the intuitive influences I speak of; and so far from being touched by the interminable controversies which have for ages been upsetting and uprearing creeds, he seemed both naturally incapable of comprehending differences of belief, and unwilling to dwell upon them for an instant. Indeed he constantly impressed me during the last days of his life with the conviction, that he was by religious bias of nature a monk of the middle ages. [120]

The article that so impressed Hall Caine (and, in his account, Rossetti) was entitled simply 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti', and published in 1874. This was three years after Buchanan's scathing attack on Rossetti's poetry in 'The Fleshly School of Poetry' and may in some ways be seen as its antithesis. While Buchanan bemoaned what he saw as the excessively 'sensual'[121] and morally corrupting nature of Rossetti's poetry, which he took to mean 'that the body is greater than the soul'[122], the author of *The Catholic World* casts Rossetti as the cure to the burgeoning Aestheticism of the late nineteenth century:

> Mr. Rossetti has adopted, as we have already indicated, more fully than a Catholic could approve, a principle which is obtaining a very dangerous prominence amongst the rising generation of English poets, that art is justified to her children – that to the artist all things are chaste. Thus inevitably there are some lines one could wish unwritten, and more that one would not have every one read. Yet for all this the *ethos* of the book is chaste and noble, nor

[120] Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel* Rossetti, pp.139-4.
[121] Robert Buchanan, 'The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr D.G. Rossetti' in *The Contemporary Review* (London, Strahan & Co. 1871), 18, p.338.
[122] Buchanan, p.335.

> do we know any poet by whom purity is more honestly appreciated and worshipped. The volume is a remarkable example of the extent to which a love for the Madonna and the ascetic inspiration of Dante can counteract and restrain the growing sensuousness of English poetry.[123]

The author discerns in Rossetti's poetry 'a medieval artist heart and soul'[124] and the 'ascetic inspiration of Dante' yet as Caine points out, how can this be accomplished by one for whom the use of medieval Catholic iconography is separate from its theology? That is, how can one promote the former 'without partaking of a feeling that is primarily Catholic – so much so were the religion and the art of the middle ages knit each to each'? He thus raises an interesting philosophical question about the relationship between art and religion – and moreover, a question that has been enshrined in the critical reception of Rossetti's work as the quintessential Rossettian problem: when Rossetti employs medieval aesthetics, is he doing so ironically, disingenuously (removing all theological value) or anachronistically? Evelyn Waugh first posed the question in chapter nine of his monograph: 'What is Wrong with Rossetti?'[125], surmising that Rossetti's art falls short because of a disjunct between the form, content and artistic intention of his works, which Waugh assumes to be distinct and stable categories. There was, he says, 'fatally lacking in him that essential rectitude that underlies the serenity of all really great art'.[126] In essence, Waugh's criticism accuses Rossetti of a lack of virtue – he was quite literally not *good* enough to endow his artworks with any spiritual meaning. There persists a strong sense in Rossetti criticism that there is some kind of faithlessness to be revealed in his artworks – stemming from his supposed lack of spiritual maturity or an over-intellectualized fascination with artistic form.

The difficulty with this line of argument is that it limits our understanding of Rossetti's works to biography and authorial intention (both of which remain inconclusive on the matter of his faith) and fails to account for the presence of devotional practice and the prescription of religious sentiments in his works. There is evident religiosity in Rossetti's works, especially given that the text seems to invite the reader to interrogate the relationship between form and content, between literary, and religious traditions

[123] Anon., 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *The Catholic World*, 19.110, 1874, 271.
[124] Anon., p.264.
[125] Evelyn Waugh, 'What Is Wrong with Rossetti?' in *Rossetti: His Life and Works*, (London: Penguin, 2011). p.303.
[126] Waugh, p.311.

and innovation. This invitation has been continually foregrounded in scholarship on Rossetti. Harold Weatherby argues that 'the single difficulty' underpinning Rossetti's poetry is the question of how 'content and form' interact, which hinges on 'the unresolved question of whether or not there is such a thing as a spiritual reality […] Rossetti, one feels, tries to make poetic use of the supernatural and the spiritual without ever believing in it'.[127] Yet, Weatherby concedes that while Rossetti does not necessarily need to explain his 'cosmology' to his reader, 'cosmologies like Christmas eves, cannot be used indiscriminately. Traditional meanings attach themselves and demand more serious consideration than can ever be implicit in a warm breast and a few artistic tears'.[128] What is interesting about Weatherby's evaluation is it leaves open the possibility that it may be Rossetti's poetical endeavour to use religious surfaces, form without content, to raise questions and 'demand more serious consideration' from the reader about the spiritual reality of the afterlife, or the nature of prayer, or what reunion with God can possibly look like for the negligent. Rossetti's persistent use of traditional meanings may have more to do with his experimentation with poetic dynamics, and interrogation of traditional cosmologies, than about replaying the same 'failures' time and again.[129]

Hall Caine's view equates the Catholic 'feeling' that moves Rossetti's aesthetics with the same feeling that moves the believer; moreover, it argues that medieval art is so inextricably bound up with a Catholic moral framework and metaphysics that any uptake of its aesthetics necessitates an acceptance of its requisite theology and cosmology. Rossetti's uptake of Christian emotions, forms, rituals and symbols, all in an atmosphere privileging the medieval, is very far from ridding his art or poetry of any theological or spiritual content. Precisely the opposite in fact: for Caine, it displays an affirmation of its values and a recognition of its ideals:

> Rossetti (at least throughout the period of my acquaintance with him) invariably shrank from classification with the poetry of aestheticism, and aspired to the fame of a poet who had been prompted primarily by the highest

[127] Harold Weatherby, 'Problems of Form and Content in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Victorian Poetry*, 2.1 (1964), p.13.
[128] Weatherby, p.14.
[129] Weatherby, p.13. See, also Jerome McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Rees, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*: Modes of Self-Expression; and Brian Donnelly, *Reading Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Poet* (London: Routledge, 2016).

> of spiritual emotions, and to whom the sensations of the body were as naught, unless they were sanctified by the concurrence of the soul.[130]

Hall Caine identifies the drive in Rossetti's poetry to reconcile the 'body' with the 'soul' but also his desire to be aligned with those poets, like Dante, for whom art does not merely represent the pursuit of beauty or the highest bodily 'sensations' but aims to display and participate in an ethical dynamic – stemming from, and prescribing for the reader the 'highest of spiritual emotions'.

However, this interpretation has remained firmly a minority view, with the dominant critical tendency to view Rossetti's art as actively detaching itself from religion or as undeserving of serious theological analysis altogether (the same view has incidentally, historically, been taken of Hall Caine's works, although that is changing).[131] Graham Hough outlines what he sees as the crux of Rossetti's problem:

> Perpetually tormented by the irreconcilability of the unsensual love he had idealised and the love of the senses, he tries to identify them. Knowing that Dante's ideal love became in some way identified with the highest spiritual values, but blankly unaware of the austere scholastic method, the exact analysis and definition by which the transformation was accomplished, he simply turns his own confused and all too human conception of love into the highest value, and calls it God.

Implicit in Hough's analysis is an accusation of intellectual laziness on Rossetti's part – that he neither knows nor can be bothered to acquire the requisite 'scholastic method', or in other words medieval theological training, needed to comprehend or reexpress Dante's conversion from sensual to ideal love. However, as David Riede points out Rossetti 'was raised in a household where Dante's scholasticism was under constant scrutiny' so he does not deny Rossetti's potential for theological engagement but insists on his indifference to it because he claims Rossetti 'did not believe in Dante's metaphysics, but only in Dante's art'.[132] Both these approaches, though, fail to account for the reappraisal of the medieval 'scholastic method' occurring within Anglo-Catholic discourses at the time (that Rossetti would have been exposed to), the

[130] Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p.104.
[131] See Anne Connor, *The Spiritual Brotherhood of Mankind: Religion in the Novels of Hall Caine* (PhD thesis: Liverpool, 2017).
[132] David Riede, 'Diminished Romanticism', in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.111.

presence of mystical expression and tacit acceptance of 'Dante's [Catholic] metaphysics' within his poetry and artworks.

William Michael in his *Memoir* attempts to explain away the title, *Songs of the Art Catholic*, which Rossetti gave to a series of poetic manuscripts he sent to William Bell Scott in 1847:

> By 'Art' he meant something more than '*poetic* art'. He meant to suggest that the poems embodied conceptions and a point of view related to pictorial art – also that this art was, in sentiment though not necessarily in dogma, Catholic – medieval and unmodern. He never was, never affected to be, a Roman Catholic, nor yet an Anglican-catholic. All the then excited debates concerning, 'Puseyism', Tractarianism, and afterwards Ritualism, passed him by like an idle wind […] Indeed, by this date – so far as opinion went, which is a very different thing from sentiment and traditional bias – he was already a decided sceptic. He was never confirmed, professed no religious faith, and practiced no regular religious observances; but he had […] sufficient sympathy with the abstract ideas and the venerable forms of Christianity to go occasionally to an Anglican church – very occasionally, and only as the inclination ruled him.[133]

William Michael seeks to distinguish Catholicism of all stamps from his brother's artistic enterprise, despite the fact that Rossetti's title clearly unites them. Indeed, upon receiving 'a bundle of MSS. for perusal […] marshalled under the title "Songs of the Art-Catholic"'[134] Scott immediately identifies it with, what he saw as, the polluting influence of religion: 'somehow or other the Oxford tractarianism just then distracting weak intellects had possibly already undermined that of this wonderfully gifted boy!'.[135] For Scott, expressing religious convictions indicates a weakness of intellect and damages any poetic potential, so it is no surprise that William Michael sought to shield his brother from such charges of intellectual deficiency.

William Michael paints a compelling picture of his brother as a flippant, non-committal, religious cynic and yet undermines this by repeatedly admitting that the 'sentiment[s]' his art evokes and the 'sympathy' that he felt for the 'ideas' and 'venerable forms of Christianity', of an especially 'Catholic' resonance, led him back to 'religious observance'. As William Michael unintentionally dramatizes, Rossetti

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[133] *FLM*, I. p.114.
[134] William Bell Scott, *Autobiographical notes of the life William Bell Scott*, ed. by W. Minto, 2 vols, (London: Osgood, Mcjlvaine & Co., 1892), I., p.245.
[135] Scott, I., p.246.

resists classification on religious matters because he did not fit comfortably into categories that were available for him, both at the time of collating the *Songs* in the late 1840s and by the time William Michael reflects on them in the 1890s, labels such as 'Roman Catholic', 'Anglican-catholic', 'Puseyism', 'Tractarianism', 'Ritualism' or even 'decided sceptic' seem ill-equipped to capture the range and breadth of Rossetti's engagement with belief. Perhaps it is no wonder then that they 'pass him by like an idle wind'. Even the label of 'Art Catholic' is something Rossetti distances himself from, because he chooses to revise those poems collated under the title *Songs of the Art Catholic*, and rebrand them under the new, religiously unaffiliated, title *Poems* (1870).[136] However, Rossetti's revisions do not arise from a newfound agnosticism but rather a critical backlash in 1850 to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's exhibition at the Royal Academy (at which Rossetti offered *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*). As Elizabeth Prettejohn proposes, this 'hostile critical' reaction has been linked, by many critics, with 'a perception that Pre-Raphaelite pictures inclined towards Catholic religious painting, and with some justification'.[137]

Rossetti would also substantially revise his *Poems* of 1870 with a clear aim of toning down his obvious fascination with Catholic rituals, myth and costume. For instance, 'Love's Redemption' prescribes a recognition of religious devotion and love through eucharistic imagery. Rossetti depicts the beloved as a priest, *in persona Christi*, handing out Holy Communion, replicating Christ's role in the Last Supper:

> O thou who at Love's hour ecstatically
> Unto my lips dost evermore present
> The body and blood of love in sacrament[138]

Coupled with the subsequent sonnet 'Lovesight', Rossetti establishes the beloved as Christ's interlocuter, a source of spiritual and physical nourishment and gratification, rendering her face a church 'altar' and site of 'worship' so that she contains within her all the sensual qualities of Catholic service: 'incense', 'sacrament', 'cup' and 'deliverance'. However, Rossetti replaces this overtly eucharistic image with an

[136] For an elaboration of Rossetti's revisions, to 'My Sister's Sleep' and other poems, as the erasure of Art Catholicism from his works, see Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision*, pp. 77-104, and 'Erasing the Art-Catholic: Rossetti's Poems, 1870', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 1 (1981): 50-7.
[137] Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate, 2007), p.243.
[138] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Love's Redemption', Poems (1870): Sixth Edition (London, Ellis, 1872), p.191.

oblique reference to the devotion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in his 1881 revision, so that its Catholicism takes on an increasingly mystical expression:

> O thou who at Love's hour ecstatically
> Unto my heart dost evermore present,
> Clothed with his fire, thy heart his testament;[139]

The beloved's physical heart becomes the evidence of Christ's love for all mankind, and enables a spiritual-sexual union to take place between the speaker, beloved and God:

> Who without speech hast owned him, and, intent
> Upon his will, thy life with mine hast blent,
> And murmured, "I am thine, thou'rt one with me!"[140]

That innate rebelliousness of Anglo-Catholicism, which positions itself between defiance (against the existing structures of the Catholic Church) and adherence to traditional orthodoxy (devotion to Church Fathers), emotional inclination and dogma, medievalism and modernity – all these offered Rossetti, I argue, a springboard from which to weave together a mystical expression that expressed a transgressive view of sex and desire as an expression of spiritual devotion to God as accessible through emotional assent.

Such a simplistic dismissal of Rossetti's Catholicism – as insincere – to be found in the early accounts of William Michael, would colour and frame Rossetti scholarship from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day.[141]

Continuing William Michael's approach, a hallmark of critical reception to Rossetti seems to be a kind of eisegesis in which his contemporaries, from across the religious spectrum of belief or unbelief, recurrently read into his works a 'sympathy' towards their own spiritual or aesthetic ideals. In his essay on Rossetti, Swinburne clears him

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[139] 'Love's Testament', *BS*, ll.1-3, p.166.
[140] 'Love's Testament' *BS*, ll.6-8, p.166.
[141] See Frederic Myers 'Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty', (1883) in *Essays Modern* (London: Macmillan, 1908), pp.312-34; for insistence that Rossetti's religious iconography is merely decorative Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), p.78; Sharon Smulders, 'A Breach of Faith: D.G. Rossetti's "Ave", "Art-Catholicism", and "Poems" in *Victorian Poetry*, 30.1, 1992, pp.63-74; Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision* ; for Rossetti's secularisation of Christian symbols McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must be Lost*; for a foregrounding of the accusation of insincerity in Rossetti's works Stephen Cheeke, 'What did Rossetti believe?' in *Transfiguration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) pp.161-185.

of suffering from the malaise of 'liberalized'[142] Christianity that infects the works of Tennyson and Clough, identifying Rossetti with his own militant brand of secularism and aestheticism, which he renders as its antidote:

> A certain section of Mr. Rossetti's work as a poet and painter may be classed under the head of sacred art […] The fire of feeling and imagination which feeds it is essentially Christian; and is therefore formally and spiritually Catholic. It has nothing of the rebellious Protestant personality […] [but] is the main an influence from the mythologic side of the creed […] It has no trace […] of the fretful and fruitless prurience of soul which would fain grasp and embrace and enjoy a creed beyond its power of possession; no letch after Gods dead or unborn, such as vexes the weaker nerves of barren brains, and makes pathetic the vocal lips of sorrowing scepticism and "doubt that deserves to be believe" […] is a mirage without attraction for this traveller; that spiritual calenture of Christianity is unknown to his soul; nor has he ever suffered from the distemper of mind fretted and worried about gnatstings and fleabites of belief and unbelief til the whole lifeblood of the intellect is enfeebled and inflamed […] Mr. Rossetti has felt and given the mere physical charm of Christianity, with no admixture of doctrine or doubt.[143]

Swinburne argues that Rossetti is not attracted to Christian motifs or imagery because of their theological or doctrinal content, but because of the religious sentiments they hold, that is the inspiring 'fire of feeling and imagination' that religion sparks in the artist's mind. In doing so, he aligns Rossetti with his own position.[144] Swinburne identifies Rossetti's works as 'essentially Christian', rendering them 'formally and spiritually Catholic', but he narrows the scope of what this essence is to bare emotion, a 'feeling', a 'Christian colouring' and 'the mere physical charm of Christianity'. In a two-pronged attack, Swinburne devalues the role of the emotions in generating religious belief and rids Rossetti's work of any theological or spiritual significance, leaving only sentiment. However, this Swinburne suggests would only bother the stupid 'the weaker nerves of barren brains' so that Rossetti's 'intellect' remains unscathed from the ravages of 'belief and unbelief'.

This reveals the sense, evident in Swinburne, that emotional intensity in religious matters is seen as something absolutely separable from, and indeed antithetical to, belief, and certainly theological questions. Swinburne neglects not only the pivotal

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[142] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', in *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), p.79.
[143] Swinburne, *Essays and Studies*, pp.79-81.
[144] For an account of Swinburne's religion see Margot K. Louis, *Swinburne and His Gods* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990) and Sara Lyons, *Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater: Aestheticism, Doubt and Secularization* (London: Routledge, 2015).

role emotions play in generating beliefs but also that what invigorates all of Rossetti's poetry and painting is primarily a concern for the emotional life. Rossetti's receptivity to religious sentiments in his works, instead of being a decorative flourish or Catholic flavour is the whole point and indicates the uptake of some of the basic tenets, narratives, metaphysics and ethics of Catholicism. If religious sentiments (such as awe, grandeur, totality, hope or devotion) inspire the artist, as Swinburne admits, it is fair to say that the artist must give some credence to the moral framework that generates them but also that the art that they produce is in some sense theologically-inflected. Theology encompasses such instincts and responses rather than being in opposition with or seeking to constraint them. Swinburne's covert devaluation of the emotions as a constitutive aspect of religious belief enables him to contend that it is Rossetti's *modus operandi* to privilege a series of exquisite surfaces – that hold greater authenticity – than internally held beliefs or convictions, the elevation of which Swinburne associates with oversentimentality and insincerity, as can be found in the work of Tennyson and Clough.

Swinburne goes to great lengths to disassociate Rossetti's emotional understanding of Christianity from orthodoxy, in an exercise of intellectual sophistry that serves only to draw Rossetti closer to the aesthetic (the rituals of Catholicism) and away from its theological 'barren' creeds, which Swinburne erroneously positions as distinct in order to suggest that Rossetti's art is immersed in the fleshly and without desire for going beyond the worldly.

However, as Sara Lyons argues, Swinburne's analysis reveals more about his own theory of art than it does about Rossetti's, and sees Swinburne as key to Rossetti's response to Smetham:

> Rossetti inclined towards a reverent agnosticism that was closer to the honest doubt of Browning than to the crusading secularism of Swinburne (one suspects that Rossetti was defining himself against Swinburne when he wrote to James Smetham in 1865[)].[145]

Swinburne limits Rossetti's understanding of Christianity to something he can deal with, that is 'the mythologic side of the creed', steering him clear of religion's

[145] Lyons, p.85.

polluting effects on the mind until what he distils is the Aesthete's ultimate fantasy: pure artistry 'with no admixture of doctrine or of doubt'.

Through his at times labyrinthine musings on the relationship between art and religion, Swinburne thus manages to both simplify and over-intellectualize Rossetti's artistic enterprise. On the one hand, it eschews 'the watery new paradise of liberal theosophy and the ultimate amiability of all things' as placid, inherently indecisive and weak-minded ('facile free thinking'), yet it denies the possibility that Rossetti might be returning (in response to schisms within the Anglican church) to more familiar and ideologically solid ground represented by the Catholic past that is the 'fiery refuge in the good old hell of the faithful'.[146] For Swinburne, Rossetti's use of a Christian framework represents a snort of derision at those positioning him as the former or the latter – though it must be asked: if derision is the purpose, how long can this joke go on for? Is it even funny anymore?

The problem is that by positioning Rossetti as neither/nor, Swinburne fails to account for not only the frequent occurrence of recurrent feeling, imagery or rituals but for the implicit assumption his works are operating on – that is an acceptance of a received literary and theological tradition and metaphysics with a systemized afterlife. Swinburne may mock that 'good old hell' and 'watery new paradise' but this is in fact one of the fundamental psychodramas Rossetti's works contend with: an anxiety over damnation and a desire for salvation.

Following Swinburne and to a lesser extent William Michael's lead, the modern critical tendency has sought to pigeonhole Rossetti as an agnostic,[147] limiting the spiritual and metaphysical parameters of his poetry to only what is known and earthbound, i.e. the life and cares of the artist. This is because he is seen as imitating – and badly at that – a literary and theological tradition from Dante that he has inherited but does not really understand: he is continually positioned as reacting to and against a system of thought that neither belongs to him, nor one that he can make his own. Steve Ellis argues that Rossetti fundamentally misunderstands Dante because

[146] Swinburne, *Essays and Studies*, p.82.
[147] See D.M.R. Bentley, 'From allegory to indeterminacy: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Positive Agnosticism' in *Dalhousie Review* 7.2, 1990, 146-68, David Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision*, p.111, and Jerome McGann, in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, p.30.

his 'own lack of intellectual development'[148] leaves him with an exclusive interest in 'the drama of the *Vita Nuova*, love, separation and hope of reunion'.[149] For Ellis, Rossetti removes all traces of 'Dante the philosopher, Dante the politician' and presumably Dante the theologian, from his works because he cannot 'move beyond the *Vita Nuova*' and instead renders Dante's metaphysics, 'his ideas, and passions whittled down to something Rossetti himself could cope with.'[150] The form of this critique has ranged at one end from flat-out denial that Rossetti cares for or knows anything about Dante's theology or metaphysics, as can be found in Graham Hough's *The Last Romantics*:

> Rossetti does not at any time show the slightest symptom of understanding the central idea of *Purgatory* or the *Paradise*, or even knowing that they exist […] Rossetti had not the spiritual energy to relate the several orders of his experience to any consistent structure […] so he takes the way out […] and ends in an emotional and spiritual mist[151]

At the other end, we find claims that there is something inherently deceptive, hypocritical or self-delusional about Rossetti's works which say one thing and mean another, as David Riede suggests:

> It is important to remember that when Rossetti, an agnostic, speaks of God in his poetry, he does not mean or intend to mean what Dante meant – any more than Swinburne, an atheist; means that the "eucharistic presence" of Love brings Christ into men's lives […] the forms [of Rossetti's art] indicate a psychological need to reach for something that exceeds his grasp, just as the Christian reaches to the infinite and eternal God; so the Rossettian lover reaches for some infinite and eternal certainty that for lack of a better word he may call God.[152]

Riede's account fails to pinpoint what this something else, other than 'God', actually is: a Platonic ideal, a humanist construct or, as Joan Rees suggests, a belief in reincarnation?[153] Ignoring the mystical duality inherent in Rossetti's verse which encapsulates both 'the Christian' need to reach out 'to the infinite and eternal God'

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[148] Ellis, p.110.
[149] Ellis, p.126.
[150] Ellis, p.111.
[151] Hough, pp.76-7.
[152] Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision*, p.112.
[153] See Rees, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*: Modes of Self-Expression (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

and the emotional 'psychological need' of the 'Rossettian lover' to reach out for his beloved – who like God 'exceeds his grasp'.

However, it is in the writings of Jerome McGann, undoubtedly the foremost editor, literary critic and digital archivist of Rossetti's work, that we find the most sustained and significant continuation of the Swinburnean critical tradition of Rossetti's religion. McGann claims that Rossetti's adoption of early Italian aesthetic forms is an attempt to recover its formal procedures without the Catholic beliefs informing these works. In his analysis of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and its accompanying sonnets, he argues:

> For an agnostic like Rossetti, the critical presentation of Christian materials allows him to construct his contemporary artistic manifesto. The manifesto is performative, coming as the image of a pastiche of an antique set of signs […] So the Christographic symbology appears as a form of artistic expression and style rather than of religious concepts and ideas. Rossetti thereby urges the otherwise Christian symbology to carry purely aesthetic and artisanal significance. Rossetti's sonnets and their associated painting are not about "Catholic" or Christian matters, they are about Art: specifically about what he called "the Art Catholic," a phrase in which the word "Catholic," self-consciously historized through an obsolete grammar, gets opened to its root (and secular) meaning.[154]

McGann seeks to recover Rossetti as an intellectual, but the only way he sees to achieve this is to secularize Rossetti and position him as a forerunner of the postmodernist enterprise that 'self-consciously' imitates ancient styles or conventions to reveal an eternal return to past literary traditions while signalling the death of new ideologies and stressing the artifice of literary composition. McGann's central argument hinges on explaining the relationship between Rossetti and his greatest literary influence, Dante, as an 'art of pastiche'. One of the first theorists to identify pastiche as a characteristic of postmodernity, of course, was Frederic Jameson. In 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' (1983), Jameson analyses shifting historical trends in expressions of personal identity. He traces the modernist conception of a 'unique self and private identity [… that generates] its own unique vision of the world and [forges] its own unique, unmistakable style'[155] to the collapse of the unique

[154] McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, p.30.
[155] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), p.6.

individual subject that is 'dead' in the postmodern age. For Jameson, the postmodern self is not just fractured or fragmented but is mere surface that denies the possibility of depth and new creation or imagination because as he predicts 'new styles and worlds – they've already been invented'[156]. Hence, what we get in absence of unique invention is what he calls 'pastiche' – that is 'the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language' [157] – and only the ability to: 'imitate dead styles'.[158]

McGann views Rossetti's poetry, especially in relation to Dante, as an act of literary ventriloquism in precisely this tradition:

> Dante's poem [*La Vita Nuova*] represents Beatrice as a figure of such inspiring beauty that the heavens themselves desire her presence. At once lost and emparadised in death, Beatrice becomes for Dante the guiding focus of his imaginative and spiritual life.
>
> To pastiche that textual scene from Dante amounts to a magical act, as if Rossetti might call back from the dead and become invested with – even possessed by – the soul of Dante. The move is born of an imaginative reaction against the apparent fate of time and history, which throws up, we believe, an uncrossable gulf between the disparate cultural scenes like thirteenth-century Italy and nineteenth-century England. Rossetti worked against that secular belief. That his project was impossible is obvious[159]

McGann poses his analysis as historically determined by emphasising the 'uncrossable gulf between disparate cultural scenes' and the 'crushing reality'[160] of Victorian society on the artist's sensibility, but the stranglehold of historicism is conveniently loosened when it comes to anachronistically applying 'pastiche' to Rossetti's poetical technique and presenting the divide between 'religious concepts' and 'artistic technique' as absolute and irreconcilable. The finality with which he declares that Rossetti's works are 'not about "Catholic" or Christian matters, they are about Art:' overlooks not only Rossetti's complex personal history with various forms of Christianity (Anglo-Catholicism through his sisters and mother; Catholicism through his father, Dante and numerous acquaintances) but the evidently Catholic subject-matter of numerous paintings and poems. For an approach that privileges the

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[156] Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', p.7.
[157] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Culture of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), p.17.
[158] Jameson, Fredric, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', p.7
[159] McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, p.60.
[160] McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, p.60.

surfaces of texts over depth McGann is curiously preoccupied with avoiding the obvious to institute a theory of art that empties Rossetti's works of their religious significance and labels them 'philosophical'[161] rather than theological, 'magical' rather than revelatory:

> This kind of art is not the symbolic representation of an original reality because it never admits such a distinction in the first place. This is why Rossetti's focus is on the 'secondary' spiritual moment of the Middle Ages, and not the 'primary' moment at the outset of the Christian era. The secondary moment – that is to say, the work of the art – is the primal, defining event. Its power appears when and as it functions devotionally, renewing the economy of artistic signs the way the Mass renews the sacrifice of Jesus. Devotion is paid to the vitalizing and revelatory power of artistic practice.[162]

McGann argues that, for Rossetti, the whole of Christian history is 'poetic construction' or mere textual fuel for new artistic designs and yet the artwork he uses to illustrate his point *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* does not allude in some general, universal way to 'the sacrifice of Jesus' but stages its 'primal, defining event': the moment of Mary's conception.

The painting may also be dialogue with Rossetti's readings of Anna Jameson's *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1868) in which she describes a painting in miniature depicting this scene in the Bibliotheque Nationale: 'The Virgin seated on the side of her bed sinks back alarmed, almost fainting; the angel in a robe of crimson, with a white tunic, stands before her, half turning away, and grasping his sceptre in his hand'.[163] Anna Jameson was a noted art historian, feminist, and devout Anglo-Catholic, spending the last years of her life devoted to the work of the Sisters of Charity.[164] However, to suggest that the sum total of this work's significance is in what it has to say about 'artistic practice' seems startlingly narrow-sighted. Erasing God and Christianity in favour of 'the artist, the god of Art'[165] and subsuming religious devotions into the rituals of the artist McGann overlooks the unsettled dynamic that occurs between this story as it is told in scripture and Rossetti's dramatic psychological reimagining in paint. Art and religion collide in this painting and one informs the other. Mary is

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[161] McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost* p.50.
[162] McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost* p.91.
[163] Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1868), I, p.125.
[164] Robert Kiefer Webb et al., *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society: Essays in honour of R K Webb* (London: Routledge, 1992),pp.127-8.
[165] McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost* p.91.

depicted not in a state of divine wonderment at receiving Gabriel's announcement, but rather shrinking back in fear at the angel's figure, which looms large and imposing. Rossetti dramatizes the psychodrama of being chosen by God, the greatest responsibility and burden, and perhaps not being wholly prepared for it (there is also the sense in this painting given the Virgin's obvious presentation as a young girl – that she may not fully understand what this will mean for her future, her naivete, innocence and defenceless are on full display). Rossetti explores these tensions more fully in his 1870 poem 'Ave' in which his speaker questions whether Mary knew the full consequences of being God's vessel:

> Ah! knew'st thou of the end, when first
> That Babe was on thy bosom nurs'd?—
> Or when He tottered round thy knee
> Did thy great sorrow dawn on thee?—
> […]
> Or still was God's high secret kept?
> Nay, but I think the whisper crept
> Like growth through childhood. Work and play,
> Things common to the course of day,
> Awed thee with meanings unfulfill'd;
> And all through girlhood, something still'd
> Thy senses like the birth of light,
> […]
> O solemn shadow of the end
> In that wise spirit long contain'd!
> awful end! and those unsaid
> Long years when It was Finishèd![166]

Rossetti's speaker figures the annunciation as a mystical event without compare 'a voice/ Spake to thee without any noise/ Being of the silence […] "Thou that art highly favourèd;/The Lord is with thee here and now;/Blessed among all women thou."'[167] and yet he renders the series of events it sets in motion, that is Christ's crucifixion as a tragedy or 'awful end'. This is because Rossetti's speaker is equally concerned with the psychological and emotional reality of Mary's life as a mother as he is with her as an emblem of religious devotion. Rossetti re-energises this well-worn story so that the salvation of mankind is rearticulated anew as a mother's devastating grief, as 'human sorrow', of a young man lost too soon because of the senseless violence of the state. Such senselessness is what impels the speaker to look for warning signs 'when

[166] 'Ave', *CW*, ll.34-63, pp.188-189.
[167] 'Ave', *CW*, ll.28-33, p.188.

first/That Babe was on thy boson nurs'd?' and 'when He tottered round thy knee' to make sense of what the speaker hints, for Mary, must seem like a waste of life – leaving the question of 'God's high secret' implied but 'unsaid': why did He give you His Son only to let him die? By positioning Mary, in the painting, as recoiling from Gabriel, Rossetti emphasises her distress and almost rejection of the kind of holy serenity or blind faith that might be expected from orthodox depictions of the Virgin. Moreover, Rossetti interrogates the scriptural tradition surrounding the annunciation, unravelling the uncomfortable lived experience and conflict occurring between natural reluctance and divine will in this scene, raising difficult questions about the nature of free will and predestination.

Unless one understands both the theological and aesthetic tradition Rossetti is operating out of, one cannot adequately account for the incorporation of Christian subject matter and the iconography used to expressed it. As such Rossetti does not need to admit to the 'original reality' of Christian metaphysics because he takes it, to some extent, for granted, and expects his readership to do the same. As Stephen Cheeke has convincingly argued in 'What Did Rossetti Believe?' the critical insistence on treating art and religion as distinct areas of knowledge, whose purposes do not, or should not, overlap risks misconstruing the complex way that rituals of art and rituals of belief interact in Rossetti's works:

> […] the mistake seems to be in the impulse to think of art and religion as discrete phenomena but at the same time to conclude from their conmingling that they are essentially identical. If the 'recuperation of a conceptual system' (the aesthetic appropriation of religious languages and ideas, for example) works to endow that system, in the words of Nicholas Halmi, 'with a new content', a quite different thing under the same name, then Rossetti's aesthetic spiritualism will seem bogus. But if we recognise that there are moments when the 'new content' has yet to emerge independently or cleanly, moments when the conceptual system seems to be occupied by heterogeneous elements, by both religious and aesthetic content at the same time, then we would be conceding to Rossetti the lived experience of a paradox.[168]

Cheeke's approach allows us to account for the presence of both hope and despair, faith and doubt, eloquence and inarticulacy as expressed within Rossetti's works not

[168] Cheeke, Stephen, 'What did Rossetti believe?' in *Transfiguration: The Religion of Art in Nineteenth-Century Before Aestheticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.178.

as a result of the inconsistency, insincerity or an 'imaginative failure' of the artist but as 'an authentic condition of lived experience'. His suggestion that the 'conceptual system' or the Catholic theology that underpins the medieval mystical expression Rossetti appropriates is fluid and might allow for 'heterogeneous elements' or difference (not as a challenge to its ideological purity but as a fact of 'lived' existence) seems radical at first, but when one considers the dialectic at the heart of mysticism between erotic speech and holy silence, sensual experience and divine ineffability then this balancing of the 'aesthetic' and 'religious' in our apprehension of Rossetti's aesthetics is not only comprehensive but necessary.

It will not be the project of this thesis to rectify this but to highlight the inclusivity and multi-layeredness of Rossetti's works which, in a sense, invite and provide fertile ground for a plethora of religious experiences (which include alienation from God altogether). But it seeks to investigate to what extent Rossetti's works prescribe a recognition of religious sentiment, and posit a Catholic moral framework, pinpointing precisely what form his mystical expression takes and how the theology and metaphysics of Dante's *Commedia* contributes to Rossetti's spiritual education (and uptake of medieval mysticism).

I will proceed in Chapter One by examining the role, not of Rossetti's beloved, but her antithesis Medusa. Looking at Medusa, I argue, in Rossetti's works incurs the inverse effects of gazing at the beloved, rather than expanding one's moral horizons the Medusa fixes one's attention on a single, limited vision of worldliness. This is because Medusa symbolizes for Rossetti's lover not a pure, unadulterated spiritual love, but a love of mere flesh that distracts him from his true beloved and destabilizes his relationship with God. I reveal the theological implications of staring at Medusa, who engenders in the viewer a state of unworthiness and belief that forgiveness is impossible, leading to a fall into despair, and alienation from God. I contend that Rossetti receives his conceptual framework for Medusa (as anti-beloved) from his reading of Augustine, Boccaccio, and Canto IX of Dante's *Inferno* in which Dante dramatizes the pilgrim's encounter with Medusa as a near-miss with despair – a moment of self-doubt that could call a halt to his entire spiritual journey and condemn him to dwell with the damned in Hell. Both Rossetti and Dante suggest that it is only

through outside assistance that surrender to despair is avoidable – specifically through the salvific agency of the true beloved.

Uncovering the extent of the beloved's salvific agency is the focus of Chapter Two, which explores Rossetti's use of liminality to present the beloved as Christ-like (dually divine and mortal) and express his speaker's purgatorial suspension between the ideal and the material, the promise of his salvation and its fulfilment. I propose that we can chart Dante's unique topography of Purgatory, especially his Ante-Purgatory and Earthly Paradise, in Rossetti's poetics, which reimagines Purgatory as a psychological state of timely contrition, struggle, anticipation and yearning for reunion. I identify Rossetti's conceptualization of a Purgatory of the mind as deriving from the theology of John Henry Newman – who saw Purgatory in orthodox Roman Catholic terms as an actual stage in the afterlife, but also a happy choice made by the believer for moral betterment and spiritual conversion. Rossetti adopts the purgatorial models he finds in Newman and Dante to convey his speaker's spiritual rebirth in terms of the healing of his emotional wounds. As such Rossetti portrays penitence as a passive state of reflection or mental self-flagellation that requires an intercessor – the beloved – to bring about spiritual change. Furthermore, he articulates his speaker's desire for reunion with the beloved as analogous with that of Dante-pilgrim's for Beatrice in Eden. Rossetti shows that while desire is instigated by the (dually divine and mortal) beloved, its ultimate goal – to recover man's original relationship with God – foreshadowed in their reunion cannot be satisfied immediately but requires remorse, confession, and correction.

Chapter three investigates the theological genealogy of Rossetti's double language of desire, arguing that the mystical expression evident in Rossetti's works is indebted to his reading, via Dante's *Paradiso*, of the mystical writings of Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure. I propose that Dante's *Paradiso*, which is in dialogue with Bonaventure's conception of Paradise as a hierarchy of mirrors, and Bernard's spiritual-sexual allegorical reading of the Song of Songs, becomes adopted by Rossetti as a way of articulating the lover's essential amorous nature, his relationship to the beloved and desire for mystical union with God. Dante and Rossetti present the reciprocal desire between lover and beloved as an analogy for the individual soul's ultimate desire to be reunited with God. Thus, I unveil the beloved in Rossetti's works

as a site for theological discussions about the interaction of flesh and spirit and as the gateway to divinity. This approach radically reconfigures our understanding of Rossetti's erotic language, by exposing the theological genealogy in subject-object relations, which transcends gender norms, and highlights that the spiritual can be sexual.

In Chapter Four, I position Rossetti as a participator in and interrogator of the long-standing Christian tradition of praise, by viewing, some of, his poetry through the critical lens of Augustine and Newman who as a matter of exegetical practice adopt a language of praise that is saturated with allusions to the Psalms. Through Rossetti's employment of the psalms I show that he conflates the language used to praise God with that used to praise the beloved. Moreover, I argue that Rossetti, like Dante in Canto II of *Purgatorio*, can be seen as responding to Augustine's paradoxical views about singing in Church. Dante in Canto II dramatizes the conflict, Augustine sets up, between sacred and profane music through his depiction of reborn souls singing the great Exodus psalm 'In exitu Israel de Aegypto' and Casella's performance of a love song. I argue that while Dante blurs the boundaries between the two, Rossetti fuses both kinds of song in his praising. Finally, Chapter Five locates Rossetti within the medieval mystical tradition, by tracing the voluntary silence taken up by Bonaventure at the conclusion of *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* and Dante's pilgrim at the end of *Commedia* with Rossetti's poetical representation of the beloved as replicating the silence of a hidden and unknowable God. I would like to draw attention to how both texts, when all is said and done, privilege nothingness at the climax of their journeys and how their dual speech and speechlessness is enshrined in Rossetti's poetry.

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Chapter One.

Despairing over Dante: Plagued by Infernal Anxieties.

What is the sorriest thing that enters Hell?
  None of the sins,—but this and that fair deed
  Which a soul's sin at length could supersede.
These yet are virgins, whom death's timely knell
Might once have sainted; whom the fiends compel
  Together now, in snake-bound shuddering sheaves
  Of anguish, while the pit's pollution leaves
Their refuse maidenhood abominable.

Night sucks them down, the tribute of the pit,
  Whose names, half entered in the book of Life,
    Were God's desire at noon. And as their hair
And eyes sink last, the Torturer deigns no whit
  To gaze, but, yearning, waits his destined wife,
    The Sin still blithe on earth that sent them there.

– 'Vain Virtues', *CW*, p.318.

In 1869 Dante Gabriel Rossetti composed the above sonnet and named it 'Vain Virtues', number eighty-five of *The House of Life* sonnet-sequence. It stands as one of its few instances in which Rossetti's poetic speaker succumbs to the spiritually degenerating effects of despair. Although it is the contention of my thesis that the beloved in Rossetti's works provides a gateway to salvation, in this chapter I will start by examining the presence of the beloved's antithesis – Medusa. It is the sight of Medusa, which (rather than liberating) threatens to paralyze the lover in a state of complete despair. As I will demonstrate from Chapter Two onwards, the beloved's grace-giving role is rooted in medieval theology, and Dante's figuration of Beatrice. Likewise, I argue in this chapter, that the despair brought about by looking at her double, Medusa, is grounded in Augustinian theology (recapitulated by Newman) and dramatized in Canto IX of Dante's *Inferno*. Rossetti, then, uses this mode of expressing and visualizing a fall into despair to convey his lover's toxic relationship – not with his true beloved but – with a love of the flesh.

As Joan Rees has argued, this sonnet offers an inverted vision of Rossetti's 'The Blessed Damozel' because the beloved, no longer embodies a route to redemption for her earthbound lover. Instead, she incarnates 'a soul's sin' and by appearing 'snake-

bound' and seductive becomes the source of mankind's Fall (and Original Sin). She fuses her body with that of the tempter – transforming into an angel of the bottomless 'pit' working to drag the speaker 'down' into 'Hell'.[1] Rossetti's speaker experiences the 'shuddering' realisation that love can lead to 'anguish' and damnation even if it feels pleasurable: 'The Sin still blithe on earth that sent them there'.

This final line highlights how this human struggle to find a way to a love that is both spiritually and sensually satisfying (as exemplified in 'God's desire') is fraught with peril because man is inclined to 'sin' with 'this and that fair deed' being either the exception of his life's work or an unrealized possibility. The sonnet's pathos lies in a sense of lost, or perhaps wasted, opportunities for the speaker to redeem himself because 'death's timely knell' halts his progress, before he has barely lived indicated by his 'names' being 'half entered in the book of Life', ensuring that no 'fair deed' will ever be consummated. Rossetti thus echoes the opening of Dante's *Inferno* in which the pilgrim finds himself halfway through his life having stumbled into spiritual obscurity: 'In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to/ myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.' ['Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/ mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,/ che la diritta via era smarrita.']. [2] However, unlike Dante's pilgrim, within the confines of this sonnet Rossetti's speaker cannot journey out of his moral turpitude, but drowns waiting and 'yearning' for his 'destined wife' – the source, in this case, of his damnation.[3] Nevertheless longing for the cause of his despair, Rossetti signals that his speaker's conflicted desire does not vanish but begins afresh for the reader who is compelled to disentangle vanity (self-love) and virtue, sensual and spiritual love, fear and desire and reflect upon the ease with which the two can be mistaken for each other.

Moreover, Rossetti as poet here bears witness to what God, and Dante, in a sense overlook about the damned, because as the sonnet laments a slight delay in 'death's timely knell' or 'God's desire at noon' may have afforded the chance for the speaker to 'supersede' his natural inclination to sin, and that though imperfect, he is not altogether beyond redemption but was the victim of love and time.

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[1] Rees, p.102.
[2] *Inferno*, 1.1-3, pp.26-27.
[3] On drowning, see also the final lines of 'The Soul's Sphere' in which the speaker sees a 'Wild pageant of accumulated past/ That clangs and flashes for a drowning man', *CW*, p.307.

The drive towards despair, in Rossetti's erotic language, expresses a desire for union with the beloved (and God) that has been frustrated or become tortuous because it is worldly, extramarital or idolatrous. 'Vain Virtues' in this sense is a rather timely piece, composed during the period Rossetti and Jane Morris were having a love affair and Rossetti would obsessively capture her image in paint.[4] It is difficult, therefore, not to see in this sonnet an autobiographical connection between Rossetti's depiction of sin as his speaker's 'destined wife' and his own fate to be living in sin with the woman he loved. I will argue in this chapter that some of the lovers Rossetti portrays during this period (in poems composed or heavily revised between 1865 and 1876), feel a forbidden desire for the worldly, which though it may provide physical satisfaction leads to spiritual dissatisfaction because it renders man's original desire to be reconciled with God ever more elusive. Rossetti suggests that this forbidden desire, and its consequent spiritual dissatisfaction, triggers despair because the analogy of beloved-as-divine has broken down. In these instances, I contend the female figure in Rossetti's poems appears snake-like and petrifying – the Medusa incarnate. This dissatisfaction leads the lover to feel unworthy and desperately try and fill the spiritual void with a glut of worldly pleasure. Yet, all this achieves is to compound feelings of unworthiness and make it increasingly difficult to believe forgiveness is possible, which results in resignation (being stuck in sin, without hope of recovery because hope has become unbearable) and despair (in which one feels that they are unworthy of forgiveness or that forgiveness has become impossible).

I will take the concept of 'despair' to refer to the Augustinian conception, which views the fall into despair as an unforgiveable sin that causes an irreparable rupture, break or gap in the relationship between man and God. Augustine in his *Unfinished Commentary on the Epistles to the Romans*, argues that it is the Holy Spirit who in person and agency cultivates and performs the gift of grace and peace that emanates from God to all sinners so that they might be freed from sin and be brought back into God's loving embrace. Yet while Augustine praises God's providential charity, he seems compelled to ask the question that overshadows the whole of his commentary:

[4] Affair lasted from 1865 to 1876.

if God's love is so immense and limitless and his mercy overflowing then what is the sin against the Holy Spirit that Christ said is unforgiveable? [5]

Augustine identifies and rejects a litany of sins and great sinners: murderers, adulterers, traitors, distinguishing between those who sin intentionally with those who sin in ignorance, the baptized and unbaptized, pagans, heretics, schismatics and Jews – contending that all those who repent can be forgiven and be reconciled to God. He concludes that the only sin that is indefensible in this world and the next is that of despair: 'continuing in wickedness and maliciousness with despair of the kindness and mercy of God'. [6] For Augustine, to despair is to deny the power of God's saving grace, a kind of blasphemy or 'speaking against the Holy Spirit'[7], which prevents the sinner from receiving forgiveness and being reconciled to God. If the sinner believes that he is too unworthy to be forgiven or that forgiveness (the gift of God's grace) is impossible, then he will persist in sin and can never find forgiveness. Hence, Augustine's conception of despair stresses the significance of the free will and moral responsibility of the individual because even having been extended God's gift of grace, having experienced his charity and borne witness to Christ's salvific agency the sinner is still able to despair.[8]

Augustine's theological works informed Newman's theology and, broadly speaking, that of the Oxford Movement. The comparison between Augustine's account of his conversion in *Confessions* and Newman's declaration and defence of his newly found Roman Catholic faith in *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864) has been well documented.[9] Famously, Newman wrote that at the tender age of fifteen he was 'nothing short of enamoured of the long extracts from St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and the other Fathers'[10] that he came across in Joseph Milner's *The History of the Church of Christ*

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[5] Paula Fredrikson Landes, 'Introduction', in *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans and Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, (Society of Biblical Literature, 1982), p.xi.
[6] Augustine, 'Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans', in *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans and Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans,* trans. by Paula Fredrikson Landes (Society of Biblical Literature, 1982), 22.2, p.85.
[7] Augustine, 'Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans', 14.5, p.71.
[8] Landes, p.xi.
[9] See Emily Taylor Merriman, '"Words, Those Precious Cups of Meaning": Augustine's influence on the Thought and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins' in *Augustine and Literature* ed. by Robert P. Kennedy et al., (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), pp.233-254; Benjamin J. King, *Newman and the Alexandrian Fathers: Shaping Doctrine in the Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); John J. O'Meara, 'Augustine and Newman: Comparison in Conversion', *University Review*, 1.1, 1954, 27-36 and Uwe Michael Lang, 'Newman and the Fathers of the Church', *New Blackfriars*, 92.1038, 2011, 144-56.
[10] John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. by Ian Ker (London, Penguin Classics, 1994), p.27.

(1795). Newman also reveals in *Apologia* the impetus behind his decision to convert (no mean feat for an Anglican priest in a country highly suspicious of Roman Catholicism) was a quote of Augustine's view on the Church of Rome – which he read in an article by Cardinal Wiseman in the *Dublin Review*: *Securus judicat orbis terrarium* ('the verdict of the world is conclusive').[11] Newman recounted:

> For a mere sentence the words of St. Augustine, struck me with a power which I never had felt from any words before. To take a familiar instance, they were like the 'Turn again Whittington' of the chime; or, to take a more serious one, they were like the 'Tolle, lege, Tolle, lege,' of the child, which converted St. Augustine himself. 'Securus judicat orbis terrarium!' By those great words of the ancient Father, interpreting and summing up the long and varied course of ecclesiastical history, the theory of the *Via Media* was absolutely pulverized.[12]

Newman demonstrates the profound and unique 'power' of Augustine's words on not only his faith but his attitude to doctrines of his own devising, quickly cast aside, articulating his conversion as a direct result of encountering Augustine but also couched in Augustinian terms – as a divinely inspired imperative to see the world as it truly is.

In 1825, John Henry Newman gave a series of eleven sermons, at St. Clement's Church in Oxford, on the subject of sin. The third in this series was against worldliness, in which he posits that 'Discontent' is an 'evident symptom' of worldliness because, as he puts it, 'what does discontent mean but that we love the good things of this world more than the will of God'?[13] Discontentment though is only the first warning sign of a greater malaise, that of falling into despair, as Newman says:

> Despair is still a worse state of the same moral disease – the world is our food; and when it is taken away, we crave it – And if it still be withheld from us, and disappointment follows thick on disappointment, then we despair – we are maddened and beside ourselves – such despair is indeed rarely found, for we are so situated but they may get some earthly trash to feed upon[14]

[11] Merriman, p.245.
[12] Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, p.116.
[13] John Henry Newman, 'Sermon 59', in *Sermons 1824-1843*, ed. by Francis J. McGrath (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), V, p.245.
[14] Newman, 'Sermon 59', p.245.

Despair is a morally debilitating condition which results in a loss of self-control and a cessation of rational faculties because, as Newman points out, it is rare that there is not 'some earthly trash' with which we can satiate our worldly longings. Newman, like Augustine, portrays despair as a mental or psychological break that paralyses the individual in their affective responses and renders their condition difficult, if not impossible, to cure without moral intervention. Hence, Newman's characterization of despair downplays Augustine's emphasis on free will, by suggesting that despair arises when discontent is allowed to fester and develop into an addiction to worldliness. At this point, the believer becomes disassociated from themselves, unable to see their moral error, and resorts to desperately scrapping about in materiality to fill the void. This kind of spiritual disfunction, Newman implies may begin in anyone, so constant vigilance is required.

Both Augustine and Newman portray despair as a fundamental rupture in the relationship between man and God, and Newman suggests that this void is filled by a love of fleshliness. This 'earthly trash', as Newman puts it, I will argue is physically manifest in the appearance of Medusa, whom both Dante and Rossetti use as way of articulating their personas' state of spiritual or erotic fixation, which causes a break from the true beloved and brings about a suspension of one's emotional or moral betterment. Even though Newman was tentative about Dante, as he writes in a letter to Edward Hayes Plumptre, Dean of Wells, in 1881: 'I am sorry to have to confess that I know nothing of Dante. He is not easy enough not to need being a good Italian scholar to read him'[15] he had read Cary's translation of the *Commedia* (1844), and Plumptre's translation (1886-7) remarking it 'has a merit which cannot be claimed by such other English Dantes as I have come across'.[16] Many critics have also seen Dante as a key influence for Newman's epic poem 'The Dream of Gerontius'.[17]

Dante dramatizes a near-miss with despair and Medusa in Canto IX of *Inferno*. Dante alludes to Medusa at a significant juncture in his pilgrim's spiritual and psychological journey. Here the pilgrim is stopped from entering the City of Dis, and Dante stresses

[15] *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. by Charles Stephen Dessain et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) XXIX, p.418.
[16] *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, XXX, p.217.
[17] See Stephen Prickett, 'Literary Legacy', in *The Oxford Handbook of John Henry Newman ed. by Frederick D. Aquino* et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.578-596.

Virgil's inability to obtain access as a reflection of the pilgrim's inability to travel further – a momentary lapse in his commitment to the journey that could damn him forever. Until Virgil regains control, the pilgrim is at the mercy of the Furies who threaten to bring forth Medusa, whose visage would turn the pilgrim to stone and rob him of his ability to progress on his journey or return to Earth. This episode is structured around the tension between the action of Medusa, and the superstructure that guides Dante's mission, that is Beatrice: 'I am the Beatrice who cause you to go […] love has moved me and makes me speak.' ['I' son Beatrice che ti faccio andare […] amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare.'].[18] As such it provides a crucial conceptual framework by which we might unlock the dynamic between Medusa and the beloved articulated in Rossetti's poetry.

In the scholarship surrounding *The House of Life* there is no shortage of readings which focus on the specifically *melancholic* nature of its imagery or its poet. As Alison Milbank contends: 'The dominant tone of Rossetti's psychological investigations is melancholic, which […] is the result of a (usually unconscious) loss of the love-object, and the subsequent transference of negative feelings onto the self'.[19] Suzanne Waldman also sees 'the persistence of a poetical drive beyond the presence of the beloved' in Rossetti's works as 'melancholy'.[20] Yet, little critical attention has been given to uncovering the presence and operation of the idea of despair in this theological sense in Rossetti's works, and even less with tracing the development of the idea of despair from Dante to Rossetti. The distinction between melancholy and despair is important here. Melancholy is associated with the languid and self-indulgent mood of the artist, who overwhelmed by the tediousness of life sinks into a state of spontaneous sadness. As David G. Riede has argued 'the Victorians […] often saw melancholy as we now see depression, as a mute or incoherent mood that imprisons the sufferer within himself and [is] the precise antithesis of poetic creativity'.[21] It is prompted by forces external to the subject, so as circumstances change one may quickly recover from one's melancholy. In contrast, in Newman's interpretation, despair is caused by an internal disruption or fissure that blinds the

[18] *Inferno*, 2.70-72, pp.44-5.
[19] Milbank, p.128.
[20] Waldman, p.115. See also J.B. Bullen, 'Raising the Dead: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Willowwood" Sonnets' in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[21] David G. Riede, *Allegories of One's Own Mind: Melancholy in Victorian Poetry* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), p.2.

individual to the real facts of their situation, obscuring and suspending moral reasoning, psychological and mental balance. It involves a self-induced state of resignation to one's failings and inability to transcend one's sins. Melancholy is a temporary and passive state, whereas despair represents a potentially permanent, internally driven condition that defies attempts at recovery.

It is clear to see why Riede views Rossetti as the epitome or 'most programmatically allegorical'[22] of these melancholic poets: the persistence of nostalgia and narcissistic overtones in sonnets such as the *Willowwood* sequence convey a wistful mood that threatens to subsume the speaker in his image of the past and his beloved. In addition, Rossetti's declining mental health, his addiction to chloral and insomnia made him prone, especially in later years, to 'continual fits of melancholy'[23] which points towards a similar tendency in his poetry. Hall Caine, although alert to Rossetti's religious sensibilities, would nevertheless remark in his biography on Rossetti that 'irresolution with melancholy lay at the basis of his nature'.[24] Ironically, William Michael Rossetti in his *Memoir* (which had downplayed his brother's religious sensibility) would also oppose Hall Caine's view on Dante Gabriel's apparent melancholy, pointing out the decisiveness of his brother's character and his poetic enterprise:

> I cannot imagine that any one who knew Rossetti either throughout his career, or up to and a little after the age of about forty, would have said that he was marked by irresolution or severely tainted with melancholy. In all his earlier years, and beyond them too, he had that sort of resolution which fashions a man's life upon his own lines, and not in subjection to the dicta or the promptings of any one else. He was imperative, dominant, self-sustained, and stiff-necked, and went straight to his mark […] True, he was always to some extent moody, and liable to the over-cloudings of gloom […] The essential quality of his verse and of his art is, I conceive, not melancholy but poignancy. Certainly, by the time when Mr. Caine knew him personally—a period altogether of about a year and a half—these tendencies to sadness had ceased to be mere tendencies, and had merged into a settled habit of mind—settled, yet not unbroken; for in appropriate company my brother could still command a variety of conversation, show cheerfulness, and make himself highly agreeable.[25]

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[22] Riede, *Allegories of One's Own Mind*, p.39.
[23] H. C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, An Illustrated Memorial of His Life and Art* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1899), p.183
[24]Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p.276.
[25] *FLM*, I, pp.358-9.

For William Michael, his brother's moodiness was 'a settled habit of mind' – a continual condition that caused him not to lapse lazily in and out of 'melancholy' but actively persist in a kind of resolute 'gloom'. Yet, as his brother suggests, Rossetti's anguish did not render him lethargic, reclusive or indecisive because he, like one in despair, was still able to enjoy worldly pleasures: he could be socially 'agreeable', 'command a variety of conversation' and 'fashion [his] life upon his own lines'. Moreover, identifying Rossetti as melancholic fails to account for the equally strong pull in Rossetti's poetry towards an erotic fixation that threatens to stifle poetical self-expression altogether, in which craving God, the other and the constructed image still persists but can never be realized.

Rossetti had read and critically engaged with Augustine's *Confessions*. The rituals of sinning, confessing and finding forgiveness seem to have both attracted and repulsed Rossetti because he called Augustine's *Confessions* by turns a 'delightful book'[26] yet in his 1853 letter to William Bell Scott he describes it as rather more sanctimonious:

> I am reading "Wilhelm Meister" where the hero's "self-culture" is a great process, amusing and amazing one. On one page he is in despair about some girl he has been the death of – in the next you are delighted with his enlarged views on Hamlet or some other important intellectual item. Nothing, plainly, is so fatal to the duty of self-culture, as self-sacrifice, even to the measure of a mustard seed. The only other book I think which I have read for more than a year is St. Augustine's *Confessions*; and here you have it again. As soon as the saint is struck by the fact that he has been wallowing and inducing others to wallow, it is all horrible together, sin & fellow sinners, and involves no duty, except the comfortable self-appeasement of getting out of it for himself. As for the women &c. no doubt they were meant for hell […][27]

Rossetti compares *Confessions* to his reading of Carlyle's translation of Goethe's *William Meister's Apprenticeship*, identifying both texts as types of bildungsroman in that they depict their protagonist's journey of self-realization or self-cultivation. However, he suggests that because of their protagonists' emphasis on martyring themselves both fail to represent self-maturation, collapsing instead into a kind of self-indulgent and unrestrained 'wallowing' in their own 'horrible' natures. Rossetti's

[26] *Fredeman*, II.53.23, p.246.
[27] *FLM*, pp.417-8. See also *Fredeman*, II.53.29, p.255-6.

curious remark that confessing only achieves 'the comfortable self-appeasement of getting out of it for himself' suggests that all the author accomplishes is to make himself feel better about his sins, through catharsis and accepting forgiveness, and reaffirm his own moral goodness. Yet, Rossetti simultaneously implies the act of confession has no moral 'duty' or responsibility underpinning it (e.g. to be good) rather the moral virtue lies in the ritual itself, so one is good because they have confessed not because they have good intentions or have done good deeds.

Clearly a sinner's guide to redemption held personal appeal for Rossetti who seemed to view himself throughout his life as a sinner. In 1870, Rossetti wrote to his friend Charles Eliot Norton, the eminent American scholar, translator of Dante, and professor of art history at Harvard, who as biographer Linda Dowling notes was 'widely regarded as the most cultivated man in America'.[28] In his letter, Rossetti profusely apologizes for neglecting their correspondence and declares: 'I am truly ashamed of the above date and all my sins of omission – including perhaps some omitted sins, – for these do strike one as mistakes occasionally as life wears on'.[29] Though Rossetti berates himself in jest (for the sin of negligence and those sins he leaves unconfessed) this is a mode of conceptualisation that never quite leaves him and finds its keenest expression in his death-bed call for 'a confessor to give me absolution for my sins'.[30]

Rossetti thus accuses the abstemious of decadence and yet overlooks the similarities between Augustine's confessional mode and his own aesthetic enterprise. For both, it is only by articulating the persona's fleshly impulses, or emotional life, and making the reader experience them that they can strive to escape the 'despair', or 'wallowing' that would make them 'meant for Hell', through an emotionally and spiritually necessary kind of self-expression. Rossetti's comments about the experience of reading *Confessions*, though very conflicted, highlights a strong attraction to Augustine's confessional style but criticizes it for not being moral enough. Understandably, Rossetti holds Augustine's work to a higher moral standard than his own poetry, so perhaps his comments are expressing a disappointment that *Confessions* offers him only Augustine's personal struggle, reminding Rossetti of his

[28] Linda Dowling, *Charles Eliot Norton: The Art of Reform in Nineteenth-century America* (Lebanon, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007), ix.
[29] *Fredeman*, II.70.8, p.354.
[30] *FLM*, I, pp.378-9.

own tendency to 'wallow', rather than a set of moral guidelines or duties that could set one on the path to conversion. As such, Augustine's approach may not be able to resolve the anxieties that punctate, Rossetti's poetry, around the inherent seductiveness of worldly pleasure but it does offer a critical lens through which to view his speaker's oscillation between despair and hope, confession and conversion, self-pity and self-worth.

'Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell'[31]: Medusa, Moral Paralysis and Morbid Fascination.

Early Christian writers from the first century author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*[32] to Augustine establish that the distinctly feminine trait of worldliness is a gateway for the snake (evil or the devil) because by yielding to suggestion Eve surrenders to sensuality and temptation but also acts to draw Adam's attention away from the spiritual. Augustine suggests that it is this proclivity to be easily misled by the senses that is transmitted to mankind through original sin: 'Our flesh is an Eve within us'. [33] He follows Paul in implying that the very fact we have a body reflects our flawed nature and necessitates carnal desires, desires which in turn tempt humans to disobey reason, spiritual matters and the truth. Such a rhetoric of concupiscence becomes specifically redirected to Medusa by medieval commentators on Ovid and Dante such as Boccaccio, who in his *Exposition on Dante's Comedy* (1373) sees Medusa as provoking an inclination within man, otherwise dormant, towards a kind of blind sensuality that overwhelms human reason and self-control:

> […] there are those who always keep their eyes fixed upon their beautiful wife, their children, their beautiful homes […] and that these things seem to them to be preferable to all the delights of Heaven […] They are not aware that this sort of staring is tantamount to looking at the Gorgon. These are worldly ornaments, from which they draw the hardness that turns them into a stone

[31] 'Inclusiveness', *CW*, l.14, p.307.
[32] The author locates blame for mankind's Fall in Eve, creating an inextricable link between feminine susceptibility and wrongdoing: 'The transgression was wrought in Eve through the serpent', as quoted in Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2002), p.39.
[33] As quoted in *Sex and Gender in Medieval and Renaissance Texts: The Latin Tradition*, ed. by Barbara Gold et al. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), p.127, see also Sara Sturm-Maddox, *Petrarch's Metamorphoses: Text and Subtext in the Rime Sparse* (University of Missouri Press, 1985), p.160 n.59 which cites Augustine who likens Eve with lust in *De sermone Domini in monte secondum Matthaem* (PL 34.1246) and *Liber de paradiso* (PL 14.329)

> whose complexion is cold and dry […] they then fall into the pig-headedness of sin, as if they despaired of receiving divine mercy, and they wildly let themselves go into any kind of sin […] They say that if it should so happen that they lose the benefits of the next life, they would not want to lose the benefits of this one as well.[34]

Boccaccio views Medusa as instigating a kind of erotic fixation or visual 'obstinacy' in man who unwittingly and recklessly surrenders to despair and a materialist worldview that prizes 'worldly ornaments' over 'divine love'[35]; this life over 'the next life'; and pleasures of 'sin' over 'divine mercy'. Medusa destroys man, without him ever realising, because she can limit man's physical sight, imagination and spiritual life to a single, damned worldview. The imagery of petrification Boccaccio employs to describe the experience of despair seems indebted to Augustine, whose own account repeatedly charges those who fall into despair with hard-heartedness or 'the persevering hardness of an impenitent heart'.[36]

It was Boccaccio's veneration of Dante that led Dante Gabriel Rossetti to translate six of Boccaccio's sonnets, three attesting to Dante's greatness in this life and three love sonnets revering Boccaccio's beloved and muse Fiammetta.[37] Rossetti's interest in Boccaccio was not limited to Dante because he also translated and appreciated the *Decameron*[38] for its own sake, finding inspiration for his oil painting *Bocca Baciata* (1859) in the culminating lines of the seventh tale of the second day: 'The mouth that has been kissed loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as does the moon' ['Bocca baciata non perda ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna']. [39]

However, Rossetti, like his father, was an admirer of Boccaccio mainly for his devotion to the life and works of Dante. In his translation of the *Vita Nuova* and also

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[34] Boccaccio, *Expositions on Dante's Comedy*, trans. by Michael Papio (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2009), p.433, ll.47-54.
[35] *Expositions on Dante's Comedy*, l.46, p.433.
[36] Augustine, 'Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament: Sermon XXI. [LXXI. Ben.]' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 6, trans. by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005). 21, p.554. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.pdf> [accessed 1 September 2019].
[37] See 'II. Giovanni Boccaccio', in *EIP*, pp.446-450.
[38] See DGR's translation of an Excerpt from the Ninth Tale of the Sixth Day of Boccaccio's *Decameron* <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1861.yale.rad.html#p202>, [accessed 1 October 2019]
[39] 'Bocca Baciata', *The Rossetti Archive*, ed. by Jerome McGann <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s114.rap.html> , [01/10/19]. Herbert Wright, 'Contemporary Comments on Boccaccio', in *Boccaccio in England: From Chaucer to Tennyson* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) p.363.

in *Early Italian Poets* Rossetti alludes to Boccaccio's biography *Life of Dante* and his *Exposition on Dante's Comedy*, commenting that

> There is nothing which gives Boccaccio a greater claim to our regard than the enthusiastic reverence with which he loved to dwell on the *Commedia* and on the memory of Dante […] This is amply proved by his Life of the Poet and Commentary on the Poem, as well as by other passages in his writings both in prose and poetry.[40]

I will argue that Rossetti's reading of Augustine, Boccaccio and Dante's *Inferno* offers him a way of articulating despair, a break in the relationship between man and God, through the figure of Medusa. She tempts the lover, away from spiritual love, to the lesser love of the flesh or what Boccaccio would call 'worldly ornaments'. Medusa (as worldliness) becomes a site of erotic fixation and threatens to trap the lover in his own moral failings until he abandons the quest for improvement, falling into despair. Indeed, 'Vain Virtues' demonstrates how Rossetti's lover finds himself, at times, struggling to distinguish between Medusa and the beloved. Dante's depiction of Medusa in Canto IX, however, offers a valuable lens by which we may unpick the toxic relationship Rossetti's lover develops with Medusa; and Dante's pilgrim who is blind-sided by her.

Significantly, in the ninth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, Virgil and the pilgrim meet the first real obstruction to their journey: the pilgrim is denied entry to the City of Dis and fears he will be left behind. It is this fear, that the journey will be halted not by external forces but by the voluntary abandonment of reason and spirituality (despair) that Canto IX deals with because it is only once the pilgrim faces and overcomes his internalized fears (embodied in the spectre of Medusa that hovers over the text) that the external forces preventing his journey scatter before his eyes.

In the *Commedia,* this is a moment of intense importance. Dante sets up the pilgrim's encounter with Medusa as a close call with despair in order to expose the latent fears that prevent the individual from committing to their own salvation, either because they feel unworthy or because they cannot see that forgiveness must be earned, leading to a kind of moral paralysis or visual and erotic fixation. It is the pilgrim, not Virgil,

[40] 'II. Giovanni Boccaccio', in *EIP*, p.446.

who seriously entertains the possibility that he might not 'win the fight' that is, overcome the moral obstacles blocking his path through the city of Dis, seeing his own fear written in his visage:

> The color that cowardice brought out on my face,
> seeing my leader turn back, caused him more quickly
> to master his own new pallor[41]
>
> [Quel color che viltà di fuor mi pinse,
> Veggendo il duca mio tornare in volta,
> Più tosto dentro il suo novo ristrinse]

Virgil, embodying the pilgrim's rational faculty, is able to 'master' or reign in his wayward 'pallor' because he senses that 'cowardice' or moral indecision has begun to take hold of the pilgrim. This is a doubt that Dante has already had the pilgrim express: 'I did not believe that I would ever return here' ['ché non credetti ritornarci mai']. [42] He here begins to lack the moral courage to believe redemption is possible, and thus starts to fall into despair. As Augustine would say, the pilgrim, on the precipice of despair, starts 'to deny the power of God's saving grace [which is] a kind of blasphemy or speaking against the Holy Spirit', epitomized in pilgrim's declaration 'I did not believe'.

Dante demonstrates how the pilgrim's own deep-seated fears impair and blinker his ability to discern his guide:

> And he said more, but I do not remember it; for
> my eyes had me all intent on the high tower
> with its glowing summit,[43]
>
> [E altro disse, ma non l'ho a mente;
> però che l'occhio m'avea tutto tratto
> ver' l'alta torre a la cima rovente]

The pilgrim only hears Virgil in bits and pieces and when he does he interprets from 'his truncated words a meaning worse/ than perhaps they held' ['perch' io traeva la parola tronca/ forse a peggior sentenzia che non tenne'] [44], highlighting his fragmented

[41] *Inferno*, 9.1-3, pp.140-1.
[42] *Inferno*, 8.96, pp.130-1.
[43] *Inferno*, 9.34-6, pp.142-3.
[44] *Inferno*, 9.14-15, pp.140-1.

state of mind in which 'hope is cut off' ['la speranza cionca'][45] and preventing him from fully listening to or comprehending Virgil's advice. Moreover, the pilgrim's forgetfulness foreshadows the threat of oblivion that Medusa's arrival portends, not just of falling into despair and severing the relationship between the pilgrim and his personal redemption (man and God), but of losing oneself – a fear of being lost to 'the dark wood' ['la selva oscura'][46] forever in obscurity with only the burden of memory and one's past sins to console. Dante illustrates how the pilgrim's gaze is distracted from the claims of reason because his attention turns away from Virgil to fixate on a distant sensory spectacle.

Dante employs his speaker to fix his gaze on a 'tower', a man-made fortification that is suggestive of a bastion of worldly power, the will to dominate and overweening pride, harking back to the war-imagery of the previous two cantos.[47] Dante recalls the tower of Babel[48] and hints that, for the pilgrim, the tower fascinates because it represents an explicit challenge to salvation, heaven and God. He shows how the pilgrim's vision is momentarily eclipsed by the allure of worldly gains, privilege and strength even though it is artificial, illusory and will ultimately prove to be limited. Moreover, the speaker chooses to focus on its 'glowing summit' or 'la clima rovente' which in the Italian also connotes a scorching flame that burns red-hot encircling the tower's pinnacle. This suggests the abandonment of reason (Virgil's guidance and the continuation of the journey to the natural summit of Mount Purgatory enclosed by purifying fire that this image prefigures) and spiritual progress for burning sensuality or material wealth – for a moment the pilgrim looks towards the 'eternal' ['etterno'] rather than the 'temporal fire' ['temperal foco'] [49] as his guiding light that risks paralysing his vision, moral development and journey to salvation.

Dante indicates that pilgrim's fears stems from his guilt for his past sins, specifically lust, through the appearance of the Furies:

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[45] *Inferno*, 9.18, pp.140-1.
[46] *Inferno*, 1.2, pp.26-27.
[47] See *Inferno*, 7.10-2 for Archangel Michael's defence against the 'proud onslaught' of the rebel angels and *Inferno,* 8.70-8 for the pilgrim's characterisation of the architecture/fortifications of City of Dis as resembling the 'mosques' of the enemy Ottoman Empire, which medieval Christians disparaged as the products of devil worship to undermine the cultural, intellectual and military advances of that new rival religion, Islam.
[48] Gen. 11.1-9. See also Dante's retelling in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* 1.7.6
[49] *Purgatorio*, 27.127, pp.462-3.

With her nails each was tearing at her breast; they
beat themselves with their palms and shrieked so
loudly that for fear I drew closer to the poet.
"Let Medusa come: so we will turn him to
concrete," they were all saying, looking down; "we
did ill in not avenging on Theseus his attack."[50]

[Con l'unghie si fendea ciascurta il petto;
battiensi a palme e gridavan si alto
ch'i' mi strinsi al poeta per sospetto.
"Vegna Medusa: si '1 farem di smalto,"
dicevan tutte riguardando in giuso;
"mal non vengiammo in Teseo Fassalto."]

Dante uses the pilgrim's meeting with the Furies to illustrate the sinner's confrontation with hisx own guilty conscience, mentally positioning the pilgrim in-between regret and impenitence, evasion and judgement, action and inaction. This is grotesquely manifested in their self-flagellation, which uncovers both his underlying desire for and fear of penitence and petrification. The Furies both visually display how the sinner might atone for his sins, yet they simultaneously relish the opportunity to harden the pilgrim's heart against such remorse, suggesting that while the pilgrim might see the price his penance will exact, paralysed by fear, he is reluctant to pay it perhaps because he does not want to – it is easier to keep the habits of a lifetime than change. Moreover, Dante has the Furies invoke the myth of Theseus to stand as a double for the pilgrim's lust.

Dante's identification of the pilgrim's past sinful behaviour with lust is endemic in the *Commedia*: the pilgrim's mock-death swoon in the circle of the lustful recreates Paolo and Francesca's surrender to passion, revealing his personal predilection to succumb to the pleasures of the flesh and inability to resist narratives of forbidden love. [51] On the seventh terrace of lust the pilgrim feels his body make the purgatorial fire burn brighter: 'and with my shadow I was making the flame seem ruddier' ['e io facea con l'ombra più rovente'] the pilgrim's 'rovente' fiery or passionate nature renders the need for purification all the more urgent and upon reaching the Earthly Paradise Beatrice chides the pilgrim for not remaining faithful to her and giving into temptation

[50] *Inferno*, 9.49-54, pp.142-3.
[51] *Inferno*, 5.139-42, pp.92-3

of other loves. [52] Hence, at the moment of encounter with the Medusa in Canto IX, Dante turns the pilgrim's predisposition for the lusts of the flesh in upon itself, so that sensual fascination – staring at the phallic tower and the 'limbs and gestures of women'[53] – becomes a horrific vision of self-mutilation and mutually assured destruction.

Furthermore, because it is only ever implied – she never actually arrives – Dante highlights that the pilgrim's confrontation with Medusa (despair) represents his psychological need to confront his own lustful impulses, the guilt for which threatens to freeze his moral agency, make him succumb to his darkest fear that he might be unworthy of redemption and alienate him from God if he allows himself to sink under its weight.

The way Dante pulls the pilgrim back from the brink of despair is by disrupting his erotic fixation on the Furies and having Virgil command the pilgrim:

> "Turn around and keep your eyes closed; for if the
> Gorgon appears and you should see her, there would
> never be any going back up."
> So spoke my master; and he himself turned me,
> and he did not stop with my hands, but closed me up
> with his own as well.
> O you who have sound intellects, gaze on the
> teaching that is hidden beneath the veil of the strange
> verses. [54]
>
> ["Volgiti 'n dietro e tien lo viso chiuso;
> chè se 'l Gorgon si mostra e tu 'l vedessi,
> nulla sarebbe di tornar mai suso".
> Così disse 'l maestro; ed elli stessi
> mi volse, e non si tenne a le mie mani,
> che con le sue ancor non mi chiudessi
> O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani,
> mirate la dottrina che s'asconde
> sotto 'l velame se li versi strani.]

[52] *Purgatorio*, 30.124-35, pp.438-9.
[53] *Inferno*, 9.39, pp.142-3.
[54] *Inferno*, 9.55-63, pp.142-3.

Dante employs Virgil to focus and avert the pilgrim's gaze, instructing the pilgrim to 'Look' at the Furies (his own remorse until it risks impairing his vision) and to block out Medusa's power to potentially freeze his imagination in fear, sin and memory – a crossing of the Rubicon that would permanently inhibit the pilgrim's upward ascent towards love, God and salvation with Virgil's warning 'there would never be any going back up'. Yet, Dante suggests that while the pilgrim obeys Virgil's visual direction towards remorse it seems the pilgrim cannot as easily turn away from the prospect of despair, instead Virgil physically shields the pilgrim three times: '[Virgil] himself turned me' suggests that the pilgrim is in no hurry to heed the dictates of reason implying that he is in a sense frozen already, not by an external force (Medusa's appearance) but his own guilt and fear of falling into despair that would completely paralyse him 'if' they succeed in captivating his psyche. Dante instigates a temporary suspension of moral agency in the pilgrim that Virgil must take over because 'he did not stop with my hands, but closed me up/ with his own as well' illustrating that Virgil cannot trust the pilgrim's emotions to go unrestrained and portraying the ultimate triumph of reason over fear. Although Dante reveals a passing moral passivity in the pilgrim, he also envisions him as allowing himself to be guided by Virgil, conveying that while the pilgrim is guilty of moral procrastination, he lets reason take over before it is too late and does not actively persist in despair. As a consequence Dante pictures the pilgrim's fear rising out of himself like a hurricane and destroying the psychological landscape that briefly hampered his onward progress: 'a wood made of impetuous conflicting heats […] without any resistance,/ shatters the branches, beats them down, and/ carries them away' [un vento/ impetüoso per li avversi ardori […] li rami schianta, abate e porta fiori].[55] It cuts through the dense 'black air, and thick fog'[56] of obscurity Virgil struggled to see beyond so that only now after the storm (threat of despair) passes does Virgil instruct the pilgrim to 'direct your beam of sight'[57] once more.

Just as Dante's Beatrice provides a model for Rossetti's beloved, I will argue that Rossetti, from his reading of Augustine, *Inferno* and Boccaccio's 'Commentary on the Poem' adopts Medusa as a model for the temptress in his poetry and art. Rossetti

[55] *Inferno*, 9.67-70, pp.142-5.
[56] *Inferno*, 9.5-6, pp.140-1.
[57] *Inferno*, 9.73-4, pp.144-5.

articulates Medusa as a site of blind sensuality with the power to overwhelm reason, as one who through seduction brings about an attack of conscience, and engenders a state of passivity in the male lover, who, like Dante's pilgrim, requires external assistance to resist persisting in despair.

Galia Ofek makes the association between Medusa and worldliness in 'Hair Fetishized in Victorian Culture'. She argues that Medusa's 'snaky phallic hair'[58] makes her the site of male anxieties about a loss of sexual, political and social power – the fears that women might use their sexual power over men to usurp their knowledge, leadership and active role as sexual partner.[59] However, she overlooks the spiritual consequences to losing power, especially in terms of a loss of self-control, to the allures of fleshly love. Medusa does not just embody worldly power but causes men to succumb to worldly power, and remain trapped within it, permanently forsaking spiritual concerns and leading to despair. Medusa becomes connected in Pre-Raphaelite art with the original obstacle in man's relationship with God: the embodiment of fleshliness, corrupted wisdom and idolatry, that is the first temptress Eve.

In both *Eve Tempted* by John Roddam Spencer Stanhope (fig.4), and *The Beguiling of Merlin,* (1877) by Edward Burne-Jones (fig.5), the artists render the bodies of Eve, especially her coiling tresses, as entwined with the body of the serpent. In the former,

[58] Galia Ofek, 'Hair Fetizhized in Victorian Culture', in *Representations of Hair in Victorian Culture and Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp.70-4.
[59] Ofek, pp.70-4.

Fig. 4 John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, *Eve Tempted*, 1877. Manchester Art Gallery.

Fig. 5 Edward Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin*, 1877. Lady Lever Art Gallery, Liverpool.

the serpent seems to taste Eve's hair as he tempts her to cause Adam's Fall, and man's original sin, while Burne-Jones presents Nimue as an Arthurian Medusa, with a crown of snakes twisting in her hair, towering over a sexually subdued Merlin. Nimue uses Merlin's infatuation with her to persuade him to share his skills in enchantment and here is portrayed using her magic to send him to sleep (suspending all his political, social or spiritual agency). Hence, Eve-Medusa steals men's dominion over knowledge, others, and themselves (they become spiritually and sexually impotent).

However, it is not just a fear that Eve-Medusa will deprive men of their patriarchal power that Rossetti portrays in his works. Instead he, like Dante, sees Medusa's destabilizing presence as having spiritual implications: she embodies a threat to the lover's very subjectivity, his ability to make moral decisions, and to see beyond the allure of her fleshliness and return to spiritual love – the beloved or Beatrice – who will be the ultimate route to his salvation.

Interestingly when Rossetti turns his hand at an oil painting of the Medusa myth, 'Aspecta Medusa' (1865), a painting that was never executed because its patron C.P. Matthews disliked his study of Medusa's severed head in pencil (fig.6), it is Medusa's

dismembered head that takes central stage, ominously hovering over the newly-weds Andromeda and Perseus, revealing that though Medusa has been eliminated the feminine threat persists because its contorted body retains its alluring properties for Andromeda.

Fig. 6 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Aspecta Medusa' 1865. Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

Thus, Rossetti's sketch depicts not the straightforward triumph of masculinity but, as the stooped figure of Perseus cradling the desperate Andromeda suggests, the spectre of blind sensuality that refuses to go away, and the attendant spiritual anxieties and disruption caused for the lover when his beloved (the route to redemption) becomes fixated by worldly gains and falls into despair.

Rossetti's design bears a striking resemblance to Burne-Jones's oil painting *The Baleful Head* (fig.7) which is the final painting of The Perseus Series (commissioned by Lord Arthur Balfour in 1875 in the hopes of having ten oil paintings to adorn the music room of his London home). Although Burne-Jones worked on the series for ten years, his dwindling health prevented him from completing most of his studies, leaving all but four oil paintings unrealised. *The Baleful Head* illustrates the supposedly happy

conclusion of Perseus' quest to slay Medusa and claim Andromeda for his wife and certainly it is the most vivid and colourful painting of the series.

Fig. 7 Edward Burne-Jones, *The Baleful Head*, 1886-7, Southampton City Art Gallery.

Set in a lush Edenic landscape, it is almost idyllic and peaceful except for the presence of Medusa's severed head, once again, foregrounded between reunited lovers. Burne-Jones portrays Medusa, like Rossetti in his sketch, as the central menacing threat to marital stability. She is the serpent in this Edenic garden – ever-watchful and threatening spiritual ruin. Yet, Perseus is only able to prove his divine lineage to Andromeda, and thereby win her hand in marriage, by producing his morbid trophy (Medusa's decapitated yet beautiful head) and allowing her to safely view its reflection in a marble font. As such, Medusa in *The Baleful Head* functions as an unavoidable linchpin in their marriage, suggesting that spiritual love can only exist by allowing blind sensuality to have its place within it – though this warped reasoning is implicitly undermined by the despairing attitude of Perseus and Andromeda. Although Perseus' eyes are focused on Andromeda, her gaze is – like Rossetti's illustration of Andromeda

– morbidly fixated on the watery vision of her monstrous double Medusa. The couple may hold hands in anticipation of the wedding ceremony to come but both are bent earthwards, surrendering to the ever-potent allure of worldly gains (that Perseus cannot relinquish). Medusa's coiling tresses are almost enmeshed into the branches of the apple tree enclosing the couple, infecting their family unit, and her deathly dark colouring is reflected in the dark and obscure wood that extends beyond the relative safety of the present – hinting that a fall is imminent and though all is calm now Perseus' quests are not over. Joseph Kestner links Burne-Jones' difficulty in completing The Perseus Series with sexual repression and his inability to reconcile his sexual desire for and fear of Maria Zambuco with whom he had a disastrously long-running affair.[60] Certainly, Burne-Jones was all too aware of the dire spiritual consequences of lust, confiding to his assistant Thomas Rooke just before his death that:

> Lust does frighten me, I must say. It looks like such despair – despair of any happiness – and search for it in new degradation […] I don't know why I have such a dreadful fear of lust. Whether it is fear of what might happen to me if I were to lose all fortitude and sanity and strength – let myself rush downhill without any self-restraint.[61]

For Rossetti and Burne-Jones, Medusa's seductive draw persists after death precisely because it is psychological, not physical, encouraging an abandonment of self-restraint, moral agency and insight, and the search for a redeeming spiritual love.

In the companion lyric to 'Aspecta Medusa' (1865) Rossetti presents the reader with a vision of female despair that threatens to submerge her male lover. Rossetti reveals how Andromeda's discontentment is the result of an erotic fixation on worldly objects epitomized in her morbid fascination to see Medusa's severed head:

> Andromeda, by Perseus saved and wed,
> Hankered each day to see the Gorgon's head:
> Till o'er a fount he held it, bade her lean,
> And mirrored in the wave was safely seen
> That death she lived by.
>
> Let not thine eyes know
> Any forbidden thing itself, although

[60] See Joseph Kestner, 'Edward Burne-Jones and Nineteenth-Century Fear of Women', *Biography*, 7.2 (1984), pp.95-122.
[61] Patrick Bade, *Edward Burne-Jones*, (London: Parkstone, 2011), p.17.

It should save as well as kill: but be
Its shadow upon life enough for thee [62]

For Andromeda it is not enough that she has been 'saved and wed' by Perseus; rather she is overcome with an insatiable and seemingly irrational desire 'each day to see the Gorgon's head' because looking at Medusa directly causes the viewer to be turned to stone. However, Rossetti leaves the exact nature of Andromeda's 'forbidden' desire (and the consequences for her indulgence in it) purposefully ambiguous. Is the nature of her yearning sexual (same-sex desire), political (desire to possess the same dominating power men have over women) or social (Medusa's objectifying gaze gives her access to the masculine power of artistry – to make something temporary permanent – a desire for education)? Would Andromeda, if she looked at Medusa, be petrified or gain knowledge of her sexual power over men?[63] In all cases, Rossetti characterizes Andromeda's confrontation with Medusa as a confrontation with herself – with her monstrous double. A series of juxtapositions is set up to present Medusa as the antithesis of Andromeda: a symbol of unguarded fleshliness, ruined beauty, 'death' and 'forbidden' power whereas Andromeda represents sheltered feminine beauty, 'life' and dependency. This invites further parallels between the two: Andromeda and Medusa's torments arise from claims of their unrivalled beauty; Andromeda would have shared Medusa's fate if not for Perseus' rescue (devoured by Cetus the Sea monster, in a parallel of Medusa's rape by Neptune god of the sea) – a timely rescue only possible because Perseus conquered Medusa – thus the threat of ravishment and monstrosity for the living beloved is halted by one who was violated, turned into a monster, and killed.[64]

Rossetti re-configures the tensions in Canto IX between Virgil (acting as emissary of Beatrice) and Medusa grappling over the spiritual fate of Dante's pilgrim, in the triangulation of Perseus' desire to prevent (his beloved) Andromeda giving into temptation to see Medusa, and drag him, by association, into despair. Rossetti presents Andromeda, like Dante's pilgrim, as distracted from the claims of reason, and intent

[62] 'Aspecta Medusa', *CW*, ll.1-9, p.248.
[63] In literary representations of Medusa there are no instances of Medusa turning women into stone, which suggests that the threat she poses to women is that they may desire to harness their own innate ability to subjugate men.
[64] For Ovid's account of Medusa's rape and transformation of her hair into snakes see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A.D. Melville and ed. by E. J. Kenney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) IV.793-803 pp.797-801 and for Perseus' rescue of Andromeda ll.670-739, pp.94-6.

on gazing at the source of her destruction. Just as the pilgrim misremembers Virgil's words, fearing all 'hope is cut off', Andromeda forgets Medusa's immobilizing effects – and in so doing comes under her paralytic power. Rossetti also positions Perseus as the Virgil-like restorer of reason because he attempts to refocus Andromeda's attention away from direct sight of Medusa to her reflection, and unsuccessfully prevent her fall into despair.

Yet, Rossetti suggests that Andromeda's desire cannot even be satisfied by Perseus' attempt to direct her gaze to 'safely' see Medusa's reflection in the surface of a fountain. This is because her desire is not purified or dampened by catching a glimpse of her double who 'mirrored in the wave was safely seen,/ That death she lived by', but is reignited in an allusion to the myth of Narcissus and Rossetti's 'Willowwood'. In *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus falls gazing at his own image in a pool and drowns, he sees in himself the desire for his own destruction: 'The image is my own; it's for myself/ I burn with love; I fan the flames I feel/ What now? Woo or be wooed? Why woo at all? My love's myself'.[65] Even after recognising his reflection, Narcissus' desire for his 'image' is not abated but incites a solipsistic rejection of the world beyond the self, causing mental and physical paralysis and passivity that leads to death. Rossetti reveals that, like Narcissus, Andromeda's insidious desire to see Medusa is a desire to come face to face with her own image, her personal history (in which Medusa is tangled up) and a kind of self-knowledge yet is a desire that turns ever-inwards blinding her to its ability to 'save as well as kill'. This insinuates that 'at once' seeing what is 'forbidden' will open and expand Andromeda's self-knowledge yet freeze and petrify the imagination, conveying that while fulfilling her desire alleges to 'save' her from ignorance it will expose her latent desire for her own annihilation and 'kill' all vision, choice and agency. Like Dante's pilgrim who is distracted by the allure of the 'high tower' or materiality, Rossetti implies that it is Andromeda's fixation on her image, her past, and the worldly power Medusa represents that threatens to paralyze her moral agency and make her succumb to her implicit fear that a state of death in life (or despair) is all she deserves.

[65] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III.469-77, p.65.

Such narcissistic desire for self-destruction is the subject of Rossetti's 'Willowwood' sonnets, first composed in 1868, in which his speaker spies a tempting vision in a 'woodside well'[66] which like Perseus' 'fount' is a man-made source of water rather than the natural pool Ovid describes, suggesting that the reflections they provide are constructed or projected visions of the self rather than just impressions or replicas of nature, he sees: 'Only our mirrored eyes met silently/In the low wave'.[67] The speaker conflates his own reflection with the tempting sight of his beloved because 'his eyes beneath grew hers'[68], hinting that he sees himself in her and has made her into his own image, becoming his own object of desire and destruction. Rossetti conveys that self-love undoubtedly leads to despair because it renders Love's 'song' (the imaginative life of the poet) spiritually barren: 'So meshed with half-remembrance hard to free/ As souls disused in death's sterility […] alive from the abyss'.[69] Hence, all the song can offer is a self-pitying lament for the speaker's worldly desires and his lost hopes for salvation in eternal torment 'one lifelong night':

> Ere ye again, who so in vain have wooed
> Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite
> Your lips to their unforgotten food,
> Ere ye, ere ye again shall see the light![70]

Rossetti's repeated use of 'vain' highlights how the dynamic between lover and beloved, wooer and 'wooed' has become warped and made 'hope[less]' through self-love so that all the lover can do is futilely yearn for the earthly 'food' of his own damnation which has rent the 'soul'[71] apart from God by lasting 'widowhood'.[72] The speaker, like Narcissus, hypnotically drawn to his own image drowns under the delusion that he is in the presence of 'Love':

> And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face
> Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and grace
> Till both our heads were in his aureole.[73]

Thus, in the 'Willowwood' sonnets, Rossetti creates a parallel for self-love as the road to spiritual ruin in the moment Andromeda sees Medusa's reflection in the fountain

[66] 'Willowwood I', *CW*, l.1, p.300.
[67] 'Willowwood I', *CW*, l.5-6, p.300.
[68] 'Willowwood I', *CW*, l.9, p.300.
[69] 'Willowwood II', *CW*, l.2-10, p.300-1.
[70] 'Willowwood II', *CW*, l.4-8, p.301.
[71] 'Willowwood III', *CW*, l.3, p.301.
[72] 'Willowwood III', *CW*, l.3, p.301.
[73] 'Willowwood IV', *CW*, l.3, p.301.

because she finds in it 'That death she lived by'. Andromeda's turn away from the present, spiritual concerns and inability to look beyond the self is coupled with her latent guilt at surviving where Medusa perished – which Rossetti stresses in his reminders that the fate of the two women are inextricably linked: 'That death she lived by' and 'saves as well as kills'. As such Rossetti endows Andromeda with an infernal narcissism that is inherently masochistic, which Dante's pilgrim also possesses seeing the image of his own lust externally manifest in the phallic tower, 'the limbs and gestures of women', and the self-harm performed by the Furies. As Virgil warns the pilgrim, though, to surrender to such vain visions of desire constitutes eternal despair and damnation – that is 'if the/ Gorgon appears and you should see her, there would/ never be any going back up'.

Indeed, Rossetti presents the reader with an image of Andromeda wasting away in front of the fountain, sustained only by a vision of worldliness (that she can never possess) and an acknowledgment that it was only because of Medusa's 'death' (Perseus' victory) that Andromeda was given a chance at 'life', a 'death' Andromeda only narrowly avoided. This suggests that in succumbing to Medusa's vision of worldly power and knowledge Andromeda brings about her own demise, which is displayed through her body 'lean[ing]' towards a watery vision of her 'death' so that her drowning becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. The allure of worldliness is also the subject of Christina Rossetti's 'The World', which portrays a flirtation with female despair:

> By day she wooes me, soft, exceeding fair:
> But all night as the moon so changeth she;
> Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy
> And subtle serpents gliding in her hair,
> By day she wooes me to the outer air,
> Ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety:
> But through the night, a beast she grins at me,
> A very monster void of love and prayer.
> By day she stands a lie: by night she stands
> In all the naked horror of the truth
> With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands,
> Is this a friend indeed; that I should sell
> My soul to her, give her my life and youth
> Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell?[74]

[74] Rossetti, Christina, 'The World', in Poems and Prose, ed. by Simon Humphries (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.44.

The speaker is courted by a duplicitous woman, whose seemingly beautiful exterior and bountiful gifts ('Ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety') represents the lie of worldliness – promising to satisfy one's bodily needs yet offering only a spiritual 'void' that threatens to engulf the speaker. The speaker may come dangerously close to falling into despair, but she does not fall. Instead the sonnet ends, like 'Aspecta Medusa', with prophetic warning that succumbing to worldly goods will bring about a loss of life, youth and humanity in a bestial metamorphosis that marks her out as one of the damned.

Rossetti suggests in 'Aspecta Medusa' that worldliness must die for beauty to survive yet it persists through Andromeda's obsessive longing so that even defeated Medusa's dismembered head stills holds its potential to enthral and petrify because he hints that Medusa's ability to do so is dependent on the beholder. The question becomes not why does the Medusa turn the viewer to stone but why do they want her to? Rossetti exposes that it is the viewer who holds this power to petrify so that what they see when confronting the Medusa is their darkest inclinations for self-destruction – rendering paralysis as self-inflicted. His speaker sees the ultimate taboo that we might not only recognize our own mortality and this tendency for self-harm but, like Narcissus and the pilgrim, we might actually want it. Rossetti recalls Shelley's 'On Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in The Florentine Gallery'; like Rossetti's double work of art Shelley's poem was composed in response to a painting now lost, in which the spectator locates the true source of Medusa's petrifying power not in the object of fascination but the sympathetic eye of the beholder:

> Its horror and its beauty are divine
> […]
> Yet it is less the horror than the grace
> Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone
> Wheron the lineaments of that dead face
> Are graven, till the characters be grown
> Into itself, and thought no more can trace;
> 'Tis the melodious hues of beauty thrown
> Athwart the darkness and glare of pain,
> Which humanize and harmonize the strain.[75]

[75] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'On Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in The Florentine Gallery', in *The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* ed. by Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1855), p.488.

The viewer sees the inherent attractiveness in Medusa's monstrous appearance because while he admits to seeing both 'horror' and 'beauty, he reveals his predisposed attitude to see Medusa not as she is but as he wants to see her, as 'divine', locating Medusa's ability to paralyse and harden the heart in the 'grace' or charitable outlook of the speaker who seeks to equate the human and the monstrous.

Rossetti thus presents the dangerous impulse to look at Medusa as the threat of female desire for worldly power and knowledge, of self-love and despair, leading Andromeda to neglect the present and the living (her husband Perseus) in favour of seeking consolation in her past and looking deathwards. Rossetti portrays Perseus as complicit in Andromeda's fall into despair because he gives into her desires to behold Medusa and offers her a mediated vision: 'Till o'er a fount he held [Medusa's head], bade [Andromeda] lean'. By physically controlling both female bodies like a puppeteer, which the sketch (fig.1) makes explicit, Perseus is complicit in not only Andromeda's despair but implicitly his own because his love for Andromeda is tainted by association – aiding in her spiritual demise. By suggesting that suppression of feminine power has dire spiritual consequences for men and women, Rossetti seems to insinuate that men do not simply get to control female sexuality without paying for it spiritually, losing the beloved and themselves to despair. This explains perhaps the warning message the poem ends with:

> Let not thine eyes know
> Any forbidden thing itself, although
> It should save as well as kill: but be
> Its shadow upon life enough for thee [76]

In an echo of Dante's address to the reader at the end of the Medusa episode, 'O you who have sound intellects, gaze on the/ teaching that is hidden beneath the veil of the strange verses', Rossetti urges the reader not to give into their 'forbidden desire' to look. While Dante asks the reader to discern for themselves the implicit moral lesson of Canto IX, Rossetti is far more direct in counselling the reader not to get caught up in pursuit of worldly 'thing[s]' and power because this is tantamount to self-love and will inevitably lead to despair. Rather, Rossetti implies, allow the gloomy presence of such desire to be 'enough for thee' – find satisfaction in the craving and not in the

[76] 'Aspecta Medusa', *CW*, ll.6-9, p.248.

possession of worldly things (advice that this poem cannot live up to). Hence, just as Dante's pilgrim cannot easily be turned away from falling into despair but must be aided, with three shields, by Virgil (his rational faculty), Rossetti presents Perseus attempting to shield Andromeda by turning her away from Medusa, and look instead at her reflection. Perseus fails, because, he allows his desire to please Andromeda to overcome his reason. Hence, Rossetti's interjection to the reader, who is shielded by the text from any spiritual danger, attempts to impose the rule of reason over emotion – whilst implying that such mastery of one's desires may not be as easy as it looks.

Rossetti recreates Dante's pattern in Canto IX, of erotic fixation on worldly objects causing the arrival of Medusa (despair) at both the micro- and macroscopic level in his poetry. Rossetti magnifies his speaker's view of self-love as a route to despair, in his sonnet of 1869 'Inclusiveness' – a title conveying a comprehensive worldview that accounts for multiple viewpoints, many in one, yet implies confinement – by demonstrating its spiritually paralysing effects for all those who pass through 'life':

> The changing guests, each in a different mood,
> Sit at the roadside table and arise:
> And every life among them in likewise
> Is a soul's board set daily with new food.
> What man has bent o'er his son's sleep, to brood
> How that face shall watch his when cold it lies?—
> Or thought, as his own mother kissed his eyes,
> Of what her kiss was when his father wooed?
>
> May not this ancient room thou sit'st in dwell
> In separate living souls for joy or pain?
> Nay, all its corners may be painted plain
> Where Heaven shows pictures of some life spent well;
> And may be stamped, a memory all in vain,
> Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell. [77]

Rossetti has his speaker offer a visual tableau of ever-changing guests, coming and going, at a 'roadside table' (implying that their journeys have not yet been 'set' or decided, suggesting they may be on the path to righteousness or perdition) who continually 'sit' and 'arise' all 'different' yet indistinct – a blur of moving shapes that hold within themselves the ability to choose their path and whether to receive spiritual

[77] 'Inclusiveness', *CW*, p.307.

nourishment. The speaker depicts a table that is set and perpetually replenished, he sees for 'every life among them in likewise/ Is a soul's board set daily with new food', recalling The Lord's Prayer in which believers call upon God as the source of physical and spiritual sustenance: 'Give us this day our daily bread' and the sacrament of the Eucharist (consumption of bread and wine which are believed to become the actual Body and Blood of Christ) reminding believers of Christ's sacrifice on the cross to ensure mankind's salvation. Rossetti depicts his speaker as obtaining an almost god-like overview of multitudinous 'souls' passing by, yet all he encounters are kinds of self-love: a father sees his son as an image of his own mortality (yearns to leave an earthly legacy) and a son sees his own conception in maternal affection (uncovering an incestuous Oedipal desire to possess his mother). Overwhelmed by visions of worldliness: conception, birth and death, the speaker asks whether it is possible for such 'ancient' desires to 'dwell/ In separate living souls for joy and pain', that is offer spiritual salvation or damnation, but intuitively declares:

> Nay, all its corners may be painted plain
> Where Heaven shows pictures of some life spent well;
> And may be stamped, a memory all in vain,
> Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell.

Rossetti suggests that it is 'painted plain' for those who forsake spiritual 'food' in favour of worldliness and self-love will be fixed in an illusory 'Heaven' of personal achievements and virtues, an indistinct exhibition of 'some life spent well'. Yet, Rossetti's use of 'some' suggests that his speaker is incapable of attributing this good 'life' to anyone in particular, belonging neither to 'hi[m]' nor 'her', leaving it unspecified, vague and uncertain as to who is worthy of such a pageant. Rossetti's speaker, unlike Dante's pilgrim, encounters not just his own propensity for sin and the love of worldliness – but views the worldly desires of all those who pass by on the journey of life, and is able, therefore, to discern from a distance the artificiality of such narcissistic vision. Such 'pictures' of self-love are pleasurable to look upon, but they are, Rossetti suggests, evidence of a despairing attitude in the viewer – whose vision is so trapped in worldliness, that they are unable to look away and even realize their own damnation.

Rossetti uses a metaphor of sealing, often associated in the Gospels and Revelation with the human soul, in which the soul is like a coin imprinted with the Creator's image or seal[78], in order to suggest those who fall into despair have a counterfeit image 'stamped' onto their souls permanently alienating them from their original relationship with God, their true Creator. The spiritual life they might have led but can now never realise, because they have been forged in their own image, becomes 'a memory all in vain'. Rossetti portrays the worldly as trapped in their regret, personal past and earthly experiences because they have complacently allowed despair to freeze their imagination. Rossetti articulates this fall into despair as a vision of Medusa who embodies and causes a state of petrification in the viewer: 'the sight of lidless eyes in Hell'. Rossetti's use of 'lidless eyes' emphasizes the viewer's inability to move, avert or control their gaze, suggesting that they are forever fixed in the moral procrastination and retrospection that led to the mistaken belief, underpinning the sestet, that salvation or forgiveness is available only to 'some' (the select few) rather than 'all'. In doing so, Rossetti presents the despairing, as Augustine and Dante do, as enacting 'a kind of blasphemy' by denying the Christian doctrine of salvation implicit in the Eucharistic allusion of the previous octave. This, in turn, renders the despairing unable to look forward to the future, hope or the possibility that they might escape the memories and burden of their sins. Hence, Rossetti leaves the reader with the lasting vision that despair fixes and consumes the speaker's vision entirely.

Although in 'Aspecta Medusa' and 'Inclusiveness' Rossetti presents the unavoidable fall of his speakers into despair, he also portrays, as Canto IX does, instances of the lover being saved from the brink of despair by the salvific agency of his beloved. Indeed, Rossetti establishes the beloved as the anti-Medusa, who like Virgil (acting as Beatrice's emissary), can counteract Medusa's paralysing effects. In 1869, Rossetti revised his 1854 version of 'Love's Nocturn' to consciously alter its presentation of the beloved as an imaginary, abstract or Platonic ideal of Love, as he writes in a letter to his brother:

[78] Matt. 22.21: Jesus in response to the question of whether one should pay tax to Caesar, answered: 'Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's'. See also Song of Songs 8.6. for the metaphor's erotic connotations conveying that God's impression on the soul is an act of loving creation, indicating spiritual/sexual possession, intimacy and reciprocity in which love is linked with death. See also opening of the seven seals in Rev.5-8.

> The first conception of this poem was of a man not yet in love who dreams vaguely of a woman who he thinks must exist for him. This is not very plainly expressed & not I think very valuable; and it might be better to refer the love to a known woman whom he wishes to approach[79]

By removing its seventh stanza, Rossetti portrays his speaker's desire for the love of a realized, known and particular beloved. His speaker experiences despair as a turn away from the spiritually consoling vision of this 'known woman' whom he views as his guiding light:

> But for mine own sleep, it lies
> In one gracious form's control,
> Fair with honourable eyes,
> Lamps of an auspicious soul:
> O their glance is loftiest dole,
> Sweet and wise
> Wherein Love descries his goal[80]

Rossetti suggests that the beloved has the power to control his speaker's sleep, because her mere 'glance' has the salvific ability to draw up the speaker from his 'dole', his predestined lot in life, an unblessed state 'forlorn of light'[81], spiritually empty and inanimate: 'Hollow like a breathing shell'[82] and morally 'unaccountable'[83]. Rossetti conveys the beloved as full of the spiritual promise of wisdom, honour, and sanctuary. Her eyes recall the altar lamps, found in Anglican churches, that burn before a tabernacle or ambry to display the belief that Christ is present through the Eucharist and the angelic 'lamps of fire'[84] that burn before God's throne emphasising her Christ-like salvific agency and holy fervour.

Furthermore, Rossetti's portrayal of the beloved as the ultimate illuminating source of light, love and hope is pervasive in *The House of Life*. The speaker of 'Soul-Light' (1871) finds the beloved moves his soul with the 'changeful light of infinite love'[85]

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[79] *Fredeman*, II, 69.154, p.275.
[80] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, ll.36-41, p.228.
[81] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, l.9, p.228.
[82] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, l.10, p.228.
[83] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, l.8, p.228.
[84] See Revelation 4.5. Dante also figures Beatrice as gem-like by employing the pilgrim to envision her as crystalline in nature (mirroring the glass-like, reflective nature of Paradise itself) and observing her enthronement in Paradise as the setting of a gem. See *Paradiso* 31.70-72, p.624-5. 'I lifted up my eyes, and I saw her making herself a crown by reflecting from herself the eternal rays'. ['li occhi sù levai,/ e vidi lei che si facea corona/ reflettendo da sé li etterni rai.'].
[85] 'Soul-Light', *CW*, l.14, p.290.

and in 'Heart's Compass' (1871) the speaker feels his beloved's 'eyes the sun-gate of the soul unbar,/ Being of its furthest fires oracular/ The evident heart of all sown and mown'.[86] Her eyes prophesize and release the spiritual fervour, warmth and hope of divine love embodied through an allusion to the devotion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (which treats the Jesus' physical heart as evidence of his divine love for man) suggesting that the beloved holds not only the 'meaning of all things that are'[87] but the transformative power of God's divine love. Moreover, 'The Lamp's Shrine' (1871) a title which epitomizes the beloved's role, in Rossetti's poetics, as acting *in persona Christi*, depicts the beloved as offering salvation through her very presence. The speaker struggles to observe some defect in his beloved that would bring him closer to her spiritual perfection yet all he sees is 'perfect praise', resigning himself that

> [Love] can but make my heart's low vault
> Even in men's sight unworthier, being lit
> By thee, who thereby show'st more exquisite
> Like fiery chrysoprase in deep basalt.[88]

Rossetti renders the speaker's vision of himself and how others see him only possible through the medium of the beloved's spiritual light.[89] The beloved not only guides the speaker to hope, love, and God but self-knowledge with the speaker recognising his own weakness and unworthiness in her presence. The speaker replicates the divide between her divine perfection and human frailty, by juxtaposing the beloved's 'more exquisite' higher love with his 'heart's low vault' which like 'fiery chrysoprase' (a gold-green precious gem) is more precious and sought after than his 'deep basalt' (a dark volcanic rock that highlights the speakers connection with the earth, imperfection and obscurity). Rossetti's archaic use of 'chrysoprase' recalls John's vision of The New Jerusalem in Revelation[90], at the same moment John is being brought to meet 'the bride, the Lamb's [Christ's] wife'[91] he sees decorating the walls of the holy city a plethora of precious stones with crystalline clarity including, significantly, chrysoprasus.[92] As such, Rossetti figures the beloved as a building block of heaven

[86] 'Heart's Compass', *CW*, l.6-8, p.289.
[87] 'Heart's Compass', *CW*, l.2, p.289.
[88] 'The Lamp's Shrine', *CW*, l.1-8, p.293.
[89] All three sonnets were part of Rossetti's 'Kelmscott Love Sonnets' a volume of fair copied manuscript texts that Dante Gabriel Rossetti gave to Jane Morris as a gift in 1874 – all thirty works in this collection were all written to and about Mrs. Morris.
[90] See Rev. 21.9-21.
[91] Rev.21.9.
[92] Rev.21.20.

on earth, site of unimagined blessing and symbolising God's goodness fully manifest, and the ultimate fulfilment of his covenant with man. Hence, Rossetti transforms the beloved into the prophesized bride of Christ, the redeemed church, heralding his speaker's induction into the heavenly congregation of redeemed souls and his soul's mystical union with Christ in the world to come. Furthermore, in Rossetti's Anglo-Catholic aesthetics the gold-green hue of 'chrysoprase' externalizes a fusion of two of the three theological virtues: hope (or longing for heavenly bliss) as green and charity (divine love) as gold or red. Rossetti's use of such traditional imagery is pictured in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848-9) (fig.2) in which the titles of six large books stacked at the Virgin's feet represent three cardinal and theological virtues: the volume entitled 'spes' or hope is bound in green, while 'fides' or faith is etched on white pages, and 'caritas' is encased in reddish gold binding.

Thus, in 'Love's Nocturn', Rossetti highlights that when in the beloved's sight the speaker feels he can rise out of spiritual inertia and obscurity yet when he fears her holy gaze has abandoned him, the speaker experiences a fall from grace:

> Reft of her, my dreams are all
> Clammy trance that fears the sky;
> Changing footpaths shift and fall;
> From polluted coverts nigh,
> Miserable phantoms sigh;
> Quakes the pall,
> And the funeral goes by.[93]

Rossetti dramatizes the turn away from the beloved's loving gaze to a lesser love of sensuality that he experiences as terror, embodied through enclosure, of being trapped in one's own fears, dreams and self-doubts which threaten to alienate the speaker from love, Heaven and God because he 'fears the sky'. Just as in Canto IX, in which Dante's pilgrim experiences his own fears closing on him, turning his complexion pale and hovering maliciously atop the high tower in the form of the Furies, Rossetti's speaker is beset on all sides by fear. The speaker experiences the fear of falling into despair both spiritually and physically: he feels not only the world but himself more viscerally, unbearably closely, causing him to break into sweat, and stumble off his

[93] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, ll.43-9, p.228.

onward 'path'. Indeed, he recalls Dante-pilgrim's loss of the 'straight way'[94] ['la diritta via'], turning his 'dreams' the life of imagination into an unresponsive, paralysing 'trance' and nightmare. He senses himself as pure flesh subject to the vicissitudes of time, feeling his own atrophy or stagnation as a funeral march. Moreover, Rossetti links the speaker's loss of spiritual vision with the onset of moral sickness, signalling a loss of self-control, because left unchecked his fear brings on bouts of claustrophobia even in open spaces, a feverish loss of balance (feeling the high-ground beneath his feet ripped away) and resulting in a hallucinogenic vision that sees contamination hidden everywhere: 'polluted coverts nigh'. This leads to an infernal vision of death – the ultimate paralysis – so that even the 'funeral' is disturbed by the restless 'Miserable phantoms' whose 'sigh[s]' suggest a futile remorse that might stir the 'pall', covering of a coffin or hearse or more suggestively a dark cloud of smoke or dust that hangs over the speaker (harking back to the 'black air, and thick fog'[95] of despair that the pilgrim must see his way through to continue his journey) but that is ultimately unable to impede the procession of damnation and death that comes for the speaker: 'And the funeral goes by'. Hence, Rossetti implies that the speaker's over-consciousness of materiality leads to awareness of its inevitable decay and death so that what might initially seem 'sweet' causes distress, damnation and destruction. Thus, Rossetti suggests despair and the consolation of the flesh leads to dissatisfaction, leaving the speaker struggling to return to his true source of spiritual and sensual fulfilment – the beloved – showing how erotic fixation causes moral paralysis:

> Ah! might I, by thy good grace
> Groping in the windy stair
> (Darkness and the breath of space
> Like loud waters everywhere,)
> Meeting mine own image there
> Face to face
> Send it from that place to her![96]

The speaker blindly gropes 'in the windy stair' desperately trying to find a sense of moral direction, illumination and ascent that cannot bring him out of his own confusion and obscurity. Feeling that he cannot will himself to rise out of his personal

[94] *Inferno*, l.3, pp.26-27.
[95] *Inferno*, 9.5-6, pp.140-1.
[96] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW,* ll.57-63, p.228.

hell, he resigns to relying on the agency, generosity and 'good grace' of the beloved, love itself and God. Rossetti illustrates that it is only through outside help that the speaker might be brought to direct his gaze upwards, so he petitions the 'Master of the murmuring courts' that is love:

> Nay, not I; but oh! do thou
> Master, from thy shadowkind
> Call my body's phantom now:
> Bid it bear its face declin'd
> Till its flights her slumbers find
> And her brow
> Feel its presence bow like wind.[97]

The speaker's plea is that, despite his moral lethargy, love will summon his soul or 'body's phantom' up to 'her slumbers' (the beloved's dreams and imaginative life symbolize an ideal afterlife, the highest point of Heaven and God's fulfilment of his promise to man) until he moves her as an invisible spirit: 'bow like the wind'. This recalls the Earthly Paradise Rossetti sets up in 'Valleys of plaintive air'[98] in which the lovers' dream 'one dream mutually'[99] and Cupid's bow suggests the speaker's desire to reciprocate the beloved's spiritual and sensual love. Rossetti enacts the believer's 'call'[100] for God's grace, that is a yearning for the unmerited favour that God gave man by sending his Son (the Christ-like beloved) to intercede and secure man's eternal salvation from sin 'the world's fluent woes'.[101] Yet, Rossetti leaves it uncertain whether his call will be answered, maintaining the silence and mysterious workings of God, leaving the reader with urgent yet unanswerable questions: 'poor shade!/ Shall it strive, or fade unseen?/ How should love's messenger/ Strive with love and be love's foe?'.[102] Rossetti exposes his speaker's fear that while loving 'love's messenger' (the beloved and Christ) may be his only chance for salvation it might overtake and undermine his ability to receive divine mercy or love. Thus, loving the beloved though a spiritual necessity threatens to become a kind of blasphemy.

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[97] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW,* ll.64-70, p.228.
[98] Love's Nocturn', *CW,* l.24, p.227.
[99] Love's Nocturn', *CW,* l.29, p.227.
[100] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, l.97, p.229.
[101] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, l.86, p.229.
[102] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, ll.118-121, p.230.

Despite his spiritual destiny remaining ambiguous, Rossetti still has the speaker declare a life-affirming hope that he will be saved from the hopelessness of spiritual abandonment (stemming from his fear that he is undeserving of God's love):

> Yet from old time, life, not death,
> Master, in thy rule is rife:
> Lo! through thee, with mingling breath,
> Adam woke beside his wife.
> O Love bring me so, for strife
> Force and faith,
> Bring me so not death but life![103]

What resonates here is the speaker's hope against hope that, despite all his understanding to the contrary and earthly 'strife', he will be reunited with his beloved in the hereafter (that is love will save him from his sins, even if his sin is that he loves its incarnation too much, and be accepted into God's loving embrace) in the eternal 'life' to come, new-born with the innocence and purity of spirit as the first lovers, recovering not only the Earthly Paradise (Eden) but God's pledge of salvation (Heavenly Paradise).

Finally, it is in 'Soul's Beauty' (1866) that Rossetti most closely re-stages the tensions Dante illustrates in Canto IX between conflicting forces, Beatrice and Medusa for Dante pilgrim's soul, or what Rossetti articulates as a tussle of wills between the beloved and Medusa over the lover's fate. Rossetti's speaker defends a desire for 'Lady Beauty'[104] – who embodies the promise of spiritual 'love' (1) and 'mystery' (2) and draws the speaker's gaze upwards to her 'eyes' (5) which like the stars in the 'sky' (6) are positioned 'over' (5) his own, suggesting that interaction with the beloved places the speaker's attention on higher, heavenly concerns – against the 'terror' (2) of something nameless, turning him towards the 'sea' (6) or abyss, commanding his gaze from 'beneath' (5) and leading him to 'death' (1). Hence, Rossetti places his speaker as caught between two opposing forces, the love of the spiritual or sacred (Mary/Minerva) and the temptation of flesh or the profane (Eve/Medusa), depicting the love of the latter as attractive yet ultimately unsatisfying, whereas the love of the former can provide eternal bliss.

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[103] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, ll.141-147, p.230.
[104] 'Soul's Beauty', *CW*, l.9, p.314.

Rossetti stresses the beloved as the anti-Medusa because sight of her does not petrify but rather sanctify. The speaker describes his beloved's ability to stun him: 'I saw/ Beauty enthroned: and though her gaze struck awe,/ I drew it in as simply as my breath' (2-3) causing him to reverentially wonder and bask in her mystery without any loss of agency or freedom, but rather beholding the beloved feels to the speaker as natural as breathing. This draws attention to the life-affirming, salvific power of looking at a beauty who 'can draw' (6) him by 'one law' (7) (that is the universal judgement of love) to one's allotted deserts that is 'her palm' (8) literally an offer to take her hand, be brought into God's loving embrace or Heaven, and an allusion to the faithful waving palm leaves at the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, suggesting the rescuing of the speaker from his sins and ultimate salvation.

Yet, there is a shadowy double that stalks this passage, another pair of watchful 'eyes' (5) that threatens to transfix the speaker's attention away 'passionately and irretrievably' (13) from spiritual love to fleshly beauty. This is the temptress which the 'youth'[105] of 'Body's Beauty' (1866) experiences in full force (written as a companion sonnet to 'Soul's Beauty') finding temporary satisfaction in her 'bright web' (7), 'soft-shed kisses' (11) and 'enchanted hair' (4) which though 'sweet' (3) he feels 'deceive' (3) and 'snare' (11), associating her with the cunning of the 'snake' (3) and temptation of 'Eve' (2). Hence, Rossetti conveys his speaker's love for the worldly rapidly degenerating into erotic fixation and visual paralysis and an encounter with the Medusa:

> Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
> Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent
> And round his heart one strangling golden hair. (12-14)

Rossetti depicts his speaker's surrender to fleshly beauty in the burning sensuality of his reciprocated gaze because, crucially, it is the moment he turns his lustful objectifying 'eyes' onto the Medusan figure that she reflects it back onto him – shooting forth her 'spell' and fixing his body into a contorted position.

[105] 'Body's Beauty', *CW*, l.12, p.314.

Rossetti's repeated emphasis (especially in the sonnet's accompanying painting and his paintings of the female form more generally) on the abundance of the beloved's loosened 'flying hair' makes his speaker's vision of youth's surrender and expiration to a single 'strangling golden hair' all the more potent, a single serpentine hair is all it takes for fleshly beauty (profane love) to take 'hold' and leave his 'straight neck bent'.[106]

For the speaker, fleshly beauty takes on the appearance of a temptress, fascinating all 'men' so that they strain to look and in that moment are 'spell[bound]', experiencing a utter loss of self-control and deviation from Dante's 'straight way'[107] ['la diritta via'] that leads to the complete defeat of their spirituality.[108] Thus, Rossetti suggests that focus on fleshly beauty may offer a temporary kind of pleasure or consolation but also alerts the speaker to its inevitable decay rendering what was beautiful, obscene and a source of despair – a horrific spectacle that intrigues and beguiles – because it prevents the viewer seeing the truth or reality that only spirit as well as flesh can provide any kind of meaning, consolation or ultimate fulfilment. Even though the speaker of 'Soul's Beauty' seems to take 'fond flight' following his heavenly beloved towards the light and 'love' of God's salvation, Rossetti does not remove the underlying possibility that he may have just as easily, like the speaker of 'Body's Beauty', been drawn towards despair.

Conclusion

For both Rossetti and Dante, Medusa's petrifying gaze threatens to trap the simultaneously repulsed and intrigued viewer in a state of a spiritual and erotic fixation. Despair, or beholding Medusa, describes the experience of concentrating one's gaze obsessively on a single, limited vision (turning away from the spiritual – the ultimate good – in favour of focusing on the purely sensual that is worldly goods) to the detriment of all else, or suffering an arrest in one's emotional, moral or psychological development.

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[106] 'Body's Beauty', *CW*, l.8 and 13, p.314.
[107] Dante, *Inferno*, l.3, p.27.
[108] Also recalls, if obliquely, a ghazal by Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib (1797-1869): I am no melody, I am no lute/ I am the sound that my own breaking makes/ You, and the coiling tresses of your hair/ I, and my endless, dark imaginings/ Love of my captor holds me in her snare/ It is not that I lack the power of flight. See Ralph Russell, *The Oxford India Ghalib: Life, Letters and Ghazals* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

In *Inferno*, Dante employs the pilgrim's heightened fears to place him on the threshold of despair, depicting Medusa's appearance to the pilgrim (which would signal a fall into despair) as implied yet not explicit, incited yet thwarted and beckoned yet never fully arrived in order to reveal that despair is not the result of an external but an internal force that acts from within the self to trouble, destabilize and cause the pilgrim to momentarily doubt the possibility of continuing his journey (God's guarantee of forgiveness and salvation to the repentant heart) and his own worthiness to be forgiven. Dante also depicts the profound power of fear when ungoverned by reason, to hem one into one's sins and cement a despairing outlook, suggesting that it is only when reason is imposed onto the passions, as Virgil enacts by shielding the pilgrim, that psychological and moral agency can be restored. Moreover, Dante uses Medusa's presence in absence to demonstrate the irresistible psychological pull that despair poses for the living whilst keeping any real threat to the pilgrim's soul or journey at bay.

In Rossetti's poetry, poetic voices dramatize a confrontation with Medusa (or the temptress) as a struggle within oneself, that is the lover's desire for and fear of surrendering himself to the ensnaring beauty of a lesser love – that is a love of mere flesh. Fixating on a love of worldly things as a means of fulfilment leads to dissatisfaction upon dissatisfaction until one's imagination is frozen in a fatalistic viewpoint – experienced as a fall into despair – that one is (like Medusa) trapped in the sin and ugliness of human nature (externalized in her visage), confined one's own fears, memories and past patterns of behaviour, without hope of escape or salvation. The difference for Rossetti is that, even if one beholds the Medusa, they might find salvation through the miracle of divine intercession through the Anti-Medusa or true beloved who is able to recover for the paralysed viewer a glimmer of spiritual hope that widens his moral horizons and prepares him for reconciliation with God.

Chapter Two.

Liminal Spaces: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Dante's Ante-Purgatory, and the Earthly Paradise.

When we were where the dew resists the sun,
being in a place where it evaporates but little in the breeze,
both his hands, spreading them, my master
gently placed on the tender grass: and I, aware of his intention,
offered him my tear-stained cheeks, there he uncovered all that color of mine which Hell had hidden.
Then we came on to the deserted shore, which never saw any man sail its waters who afterwards experienced return.
There he girded me as it pleased another: Oh wonder! for as he plucked the humble plant,
it was suddenly reborn, identical, where he had uprooted it.

[Quando noi fummo là 've la rugiada
pugna col sole, per essere in parte
dove, ad orezza, poco si dirada,
ambo le mani in su Perbetta sparte
soavemente '1 mio maestro pose:
ond' io, che fui accorto di sua arte,
porsi ver' lui le guance lagrimose;
ivi mi fece tutto discoverto
quel color che 1'inferno mi nascose.
Venimmo poi in sul lito diserto,
che mai non vide navicar sue acque
omo che di tornar sia poscia esperto.
Quivi mi cinse sì com' altrui piacque:
oh maraviglia! ché qual elli scelse
Pumile pianta, cotal si rinacque
subitamente là onde 1'avelse.]

– *Purgatorio*, 1:121-136, pp.24-5

Dante ends the first canto of *Purgatorio* with an image of the pilgrim and Virgil emerging 'suddenly reborn' onto the shores of the island of Purgatory, having escaped the seemingly unending dark, despairing inarticulacy of Hell. Like victims of a shipwreck they cling onto the 'deserted shore', their promise of salvation. It is in

Ante-Purgatory – topographically an original creation of Dante's, a liminal space outside of Purgatory proper, in which penitent souls must wait before beginning active purification – that the pilgrim experiences both remorse, and the relief of knowing his deliverance is at hand.[1] Baptized by Virgil, who washes away the grime of Hell, the pilgrim is cleansed of the stain of sin, feelings of guilt and complicity with sinners in Hell. It is from this point of no return that he will pay off the debt of temporary punishment. This liminal space is our inauguration to Purgatory, and its end – the Earthly Paradise – will prove to be equally liminal. After all the penitence and purification involved in scaling the purgatorial mountain, the pilgrim finds himself in the place we all came from, Eden, restoring his relationship with Beatrice, his original (unfallen) state of innocence and immortality, and beyond the Earthly Paradise to be reconciled with God.

The pilgrim's purgatorial journey thus culminates in a return to origins, to an idyll of eternal spring in which man was innocent and happy, in harmony with nature, his beloved and God. It will be my contention that the two liminal spaces that bookend Dante's *Purgatorio* were important to Dante Gabriel Rossetti. On one end there is Ante-Purgatory situated on a literal threshold, approaching Purgatory proper. It is a place of passive purgation for souls who are saved but made no reparations in this life. Here the negligent, late-repentant, lazy, and excommunicated are held in a state of temporary suspension – neither able to achieve satisfaction nor able to abandon the enterprise – where they can only wait for a fixed period of time to begin their penance. At the other end, there lies the Earthly Paradise which resides at the zenith of Mount Purgatory and on the brink of Paradise proper, a space in which material and spiritual realms meet, but so too do the living and the figure of the beloved, interacting in a series of personal yet public, tender yet apocalyptic, and erotic yet sacred encounters.

Such liminality is key to understanding Rossetti's erotic language, which oscillates between expressions of lack and excess, mystery and solution, ineffability and a drive for unity – so that his speakers are often, like Dante's penitent souls, suspended between the ideal and material. It also illuminates Rossetti's treatment of the beloved, who simultaneously represents both absence and presence, unknowability and

[1] Lino Pertile, 'Narrative Structure', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante's 'Commedia*', ed. by Zygmunt G. Baranski et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.7.

familiarity, and spirituality and earthliness. Rossetti's rewriting of Purgatory, then, focuses on the edges because it is here that desire operates most urgently, either longing to make amends or the anticipation to be reunited with the beloved. As the speaker of Rossetti's sonnet 'Through Death to Love' (1881) demonstrates:

> Even such, within some glass dimmed by our breath,
> Our hearts discern wild images of Death,
> Shadows and shoals that edge eternity.
>
> Howbeit athwart Death's imminent shade doth soar
> One Power, than flow of stream or flight of dove
> Sweeter to glide around, to brood above,
> Tell me, my heart, – what angel-greeted door
> Or threshold of wing-winnowed threshing-floor
> Hath guest fire-fledged as thine, whose lord is Love?[2]

The sonnet reflects Rossetti's intense interest in the liminal spaces between life and the afterlife. It is onto these transitional spaces that we can map Dante's Ante-Purgatory and Earthly Paradise because, as his speaker suggests, they take on the characteristics of Purgatory: 'wing-winnowed threshing floor'. The speaker expresses his longing to know what awaits him in the hereafter, but all he can see are 'Shadows and shoals', flashes of Hell's obscurity and the safety of the purgatorial 'shore'. This is until, he feels, the transcendental and absolute 'Power' of the beloved, whom he addresses as 'my heart' and sees 'fire-fledged' in Love's glory. Rossetti suggests that the beloved offers the speaker glimpses of Dante's Ante-Purgatory, from the 'angel-greeted door' of Purgatory[3] to 'wild images' of a spiritual workshop for the soul that 'threshold of wing-winnowed threshing-floor'. Rossetti's rhetorical question at the sonnet's end, asking which doorway to Purgatory possesses the beloved as its angelic guard, heightens his speaker's insecurity that his beloved may not be there to 'greet' him or give him admittance to salvation, and that he may be fated to always skirt its 'edge'.

Rossetti's poetics, however, do diverge from Dante's because he experiments with the idea of Purgatory as a state of mind, rather than a place one occupies after death. As such, I will argue that Rossetti's poetry and paintings are purgatorial in the sense that they inhabit liminal spaces of emotional uncertainty, anticipation, and struggle from

[2] 'Through Death to Love', *CW*, ll.6-14, p.296.
[3] See *Purgatorio*, 4.129.

his sonnet sequence *The House of Life* (1881) and 'The Portrait' to *La Pia De' Tolomei* (1868-1880), and the picture *The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Paradise* (1853-4). Rossetti's speakers and subjects express the sentiments associated with penitential rituals, those uncomfortable states of regret, self-reproach and yearning for reconciliation.

Rossetti and Purgatory

As I outlined in the Introduction, in his *Memoir*, William Michael details William Bell Scott's account of a curious incident that occurred on 24th October of 1881 some six months before Rossetti's death. In his account, Scott recalls that Rossetti, seemingly in an imitation of Dante's late-repentant, called for a priest to grant him absolution:

> At first no one took any notice of this demand for a confessor. We thought his mind wandering, or that he was dreaming. But on its earnest repetition, with his eyes open, I for one put him in mind of his not being a papist, and of his extreme agnosticism. 'I don't care about that,' was his puzzling reply. 'I can make nothing of Christianity, but I only want a confessor to give me absolution for my sins.' This was so truly like a man living or rather dying in A.D. 1300 that it was impossible to do anything but smile. Yet he was serious, and went on: 'I believe in a future life. Have I not had evidence of that often enough? Have I not heard and seen those that died long years ago? What I want now is absolution for my sins, that's all.[4]

Although William Michael gives 'full credence'[5] to the accuracy of this episode, which seems to undermine what Scott called Rossetti's 'extreme agnosticism' (one wonders how extreme it can be if he needs to be reminded of it) he and his close acquaintances take his brother's religious anxiety less than seriously labelling it 'a gloomy joke'[6] or having 'quite as much to do with chloral as with creed'.[7] How indicative this is of Rossetti's thoughts on the matter is much less clear as he seems to be motivated by feeling rather than doctrine (being unable to make anything 'out of Christianity') viewing confession not so much as a moral necessity rather as a cathartic purging of emotions, which suggests that Rossetti relates to religion on a

[4] *FLM*, I, p.378-9.
[5] *FLM*, I, p.379.
[6] *FLM*, I, p.379.
[7] *FLM*, I, p.381.

psychological emotional level that appeals to or comforts his 'Christian sympathies'[8] rather than his beliefs.

However, William Michael does shed light on his brother's conception of the 'future life', he records:

> I have little doubt however that, in the case of persons so faulty as he knew and acknowledged himself to be, yet not ignoble in faculty or aim, he credited neither immediate bliss after death nor irrevocable "damnation," but rather a period of purgation and atonement, with gradual ascent, comparable more or less to the purgatory of Roman Catholics. On this momentous subject I never saw him to be agitated, timorous, or mentally harassed. He seemed willing to accept his fate, such as some eternal decree might impose it.[9]

This suggests that Rossetti placed himself and possibly the speakers of his poems neither here nor there, not deserving enough for the 'bliss' of Heaven but certainly not pitiful enough for the agonies of Hell, rather he envisions an afterlife marked by 'gradual' progression of struggle, self-reproach and purification before ultimate union with God, a prospect he seemed content to accept. Perhaps then, Rossetti's preoccupation (in his final years) with attending confession is not as 'puzzling' as Scott first conveys because Rossetti seems to be preparing himself for the 'fate' he feels awaits him, that is the confession, remorse, penance and reparation that will be exacted in Purgatory if not on earth.

Rossetti, however, does not reinvent Purgatory for the Victorians. Rather, like so much of Rossetti's work, his poems can be seen in dialogue with a re-evaluation of Roman Catholic doctrines, sacraments and rituals occurring a generation earlier in the wake of the Oxford Movement, which included Purgatory. John Henry Newman scandalized readers, in 1841, by suggesting the possibility of an Anglican purgatory in Tract 90 of *Tracts for the Times*. This most incendiary of ideas sounded the death-knell of this series of theological publications (Tract 90 was the last). However, Newman's revision of what he calls the Romish 'fire of Judgement'[10] moderates the more extremes aspects of the doctrine. Newman does not retain the hierarchical or topographical structure of Purgatory, as arranged in Dante's Mount Purgatory, with

[8] *FLM*, I, p.379.
[9] *FLM*, I, p.381.
[10] John Henry Newman, *Tract for the Times No. 90* (Reprint, New York: J. A. Sparks, 1841), p.25.

its systematic allotment of suitably gruelling punitive trials (torment by fire for instance). [11] Indeed even after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, in 1845, Newman retains his view that 'Judgement' is no longer a place of physical pain rather it is an 'intermediate state'[12] of individual moral development, 'progressive sanctification'[13] or introspection: 'the time of waiting between death and Christ's coming […] a time of maturing that fruit of grace, but partly formed in them in this life – a school time of contemplation'.[14] Newman proposes Purgatory as a state of spiritual growth and conversion that like Rossetti's reported sense of a 'gradual ascent', is a painstakingly slow process. I will argue that Rossetti's relocation of Purgatory from a stage in the afterlife to the mind (as a lived emotional experience) arises out of a theological tradition, instigated by Newman, that wants to consider Purgatory seriously, and recast it in psychological terms (although, of course Newman did also believe in its metaphysical reality too). Newman's epic poem 'The Dream of Gerontius' (1866) portrays the journey of a dying man, who awakes in the hereafter as a soul preparing for judgement. Indeed, it dramatizes Newman's vision of what obtaining Purgatory means – which is not merely assent to divine punishment, but a joyful choice made by the believer to better themselves and heal through suffering. A rare first edition of Newman's 'The Dream of Gerontius' is included amongst the titles in the Rossetti family library, in all likelihood Christina's copy, but was available for anyone to read.[15] Though it remains uncertain the extent to which Rossetti engaged directly with Newman's writings it seems highly unlikely, if not unimaginable, that he did not come across any of his poetry, theological works or ideas, given Newman's indelible influence on the Anglican church, Rossetti's Anglo-Catholic upbringing and his close family and friends.

As such there is a strong case to suggest an uptake of Newman's ideas, in a broad sense, in Rossetti's works and this is something biographer Peter Walker Nicholson, fellow artist and contemporary of Rossetti, observes:

> […] the only man who has the same qualities as Rossetti is Cardinal J.H. Newman. Newman represents the dogmatic and logical side of medievalism

[11] Newman, *Tract for the Times No. 90*, p.25.
[12] John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, III, Sermon 25 (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1891), p.367.
[13] Newman, *Tract for the Times No. 90*, p.25.
[14] Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, p.377.
[15] *Books from the Libraries of Christina, Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti*, ed. by William E. Fredeman (London: Betram Rota, 1973).

> as Rossetti represents the mystical side. Both look beyond the shows of the world; each passes somewhat into the special field of the other […] There is in both men a simple, direct, almost childlike way of looking at death. It is the passing into another place; but the younger poet, unlike the elder, could not fancy any severing of the eternal love begun on earth.[16]

Nicholson draws attention to the overlap in Newman and Rossetti's works, suggesting that they share a way of conceptualizing the afterlife that informs their respective theological and poetic endeavours – which crucially enables them to cross over 'into the special field of the other'. Hence, he proposes that Rossetti's poetry is, in a sense, in dialogue with Newman's theology, while Newman's poetry, at times, partakes of the mystical quality of Rossetti's verse.

In 1881, Rossetti published a sonnet entitled 'The Heart of the Night', depicting his speaker's journey to spiritual rebirth, which he included in the second part of his sonnet-sequence *The House of Life* under the heading 'Change and Fate'.[17] Significantly, its title alludes to the 'Dark Night of the Soul' (1577-1579), a poem and treatise by Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, who narrates the sensory and spiritual purgation of the soul in preparation for mystical union with God. As such, Rossetti's approach in this sonnet arises out of a theological tradition, from St. John of the Cross to Newman, that understands Purgatory in terms of earthly purgation. His speaker certainly demonstrates the agony of waiting for expiation:

> From child to youth; from youth to arduous man;
> From lethargy to fever of the heart;
> From faithful life to dream-dowered days apart;
> From trust to doubt; from doubt to brink of ban;—
> Thus much of change in one swift cycle ran
> Till now. Alas, the soul!—how soon must she
> Accept her primal immortality,—
> The flesh resume its dust whence it began?
>
> O Lord of work and peace! O Lord of life!
> O Lord, the awful Lord of will! though late,
> Even yet renew this soul with duteous breath:
> That when the peace is garnered in from strife,
> The work retrieved, the will regenerate,
> This soul may see thy face, O Lord of death![18]

[16] Peter Walker Nicholson, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Edinburgh: William Brown, 1886), p.12.
[17] *BS*, p.228.
[18] 'The Heart of the Night', CW, p.309.

Rossetti's speaker describes the 'arduous' spiritual struggle man experiences, in this life, in his physical maturation from 'child' to 'man', which almost leads him to spiritual alienation ('brink of ban'), yet it is in his advancing years that he discovers a renewed sense of piety and recovers his imaginative life. Rossetti employs his speaker to depict an eternal return in which his 'cycle' from 'trust to doubt' brings him back, at the end, to the 'faithful life': life's progress may be swift, but Rossetti hints that the journey, an earthly analogy of the purgatorial one, will be slow, by keeping his speaker suspended in state of heightened anticipation: 'Alas, the soul! – how soon must she/Accept her primal immortality, – The flesh resume its dust whence it began?' Rossetti signals his speaker's longing to return to his origins, to eternal life. He also suggests, in his appeal to a feminine soul, that redemption is only possible through the external assistance of the beloved. It is only through spiritual union with the beloved's soul that he can hope to return to Eden (to man's first union with woman). He calls repeatedly on the 'Lord' of all to revive 'this soul with duteous breath' so that 'though late' he may even 'now' through 'strife' and penitential 'work' be brought 'peace', purifying his 'soul' to see the 'face' of God. Hence, in this poem, Rossetti replicates in part Newman's account of Purgatory as a state where 'the sins of youth are turned to account by the profitable penance of manhood' and St. John's passive night of purgation, in which it is only by divine intercession that man can begin the long route to God. As St. John of the Cross proposes in Book I, chapter III, of his commentary on the 'Dark Night':

> […] however greatly the soul itself labors, it cannot actively purify itself so as to be in the least degree prepared for the Divine union of perfection of love, if God takes not its hand and purges it not in that dark fire. [19]

He suggests that because of a fundamental insufficiency in man, man cannot completely prepare himself, that is attain that degree of purification necessary, for union with God. Instead, man requires the abundance of divine aid to achieve complete purification, and union with God.

Rossetti seems to have in mind something closer to the Purgatory of Newman then the Romish 'flames'[20], which though 'tedious' ultimately leaves souls 'soothed, quieted,

[19] St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* trans. by E. Allison Peers (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications), Bk I, III.3, p.10.
[20] Newman, *Tract for the Times No. 90*, p.25.

[and] consoled'.[21] Yet, the process of 'gradual ascent' for Rossetti's speakers seems to be a passive one, requiring an intercessor.

Rossetti's speakers and subjects thus find their promise of salvation, sanctuary and refuge in the figure of the beloved, who acts as this divine intercessor and can – by association – redeem the lover through her merits and Christ-like salvific agency. In something of a reversal of original sin, affiliation with the beloved purifies the lover and prepares him for deliverance to God.

Rossetti's interest in spiritual rebirth is not consigned to latter part of the sonnet-sequence, however, because from the very third sonnet of *The House of Life*, 'Love's Testament' (1869), his speaker experiences an elevated state of religiosity through the physical love and spiritual rapture that is afforded to him by his beloved:

> O thou who at Love's hour ecstatically
> Unto my heart dost evermore present,
> Clothed with his fire, thy heart his testament;
> Whom I have neared and felt thy breath to be
> The inmost incense of his sanctuary;
> Who without speech hast owned him, and, intent
> Upon his will, thy life with mine hast blent,
> And murmured, "I am thine, thou'rt one with me!"
>
> O what from thee the grace, to me the prize,
> And what to Love the glory,—when the whole
> Of the deep stair thou tread'st to the dim shoal
> And weary water of the place of sighs,
> And there dost work deliverance, as thine eyes
> Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul![22]

Rossetti highlights the speaker's propensity to view the beloved as a bridge between the earthly and the divine, because the speaker perceives his beloved's spontaneous apparition 'ecstatically', in a mystical state of rapture, which causes him to self-transcend and leave his body altogether and enables him to commune with the infinite, 'evermore' or divine. Rossetti's speaker locates divinity not outside of but within the 'heart' of mankind, specifically within his beloved's physical 'heart'. Rossetti clearly here recasts the devotion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which treats Jesus' physical heart as a symbol for his divine love for man. This practice garnered prominence after

[21] Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, pp.372-3.
[22] 'Love's Testament', *CW*, p.277.

the mystical revelations of a French Visitationist nun, Margaret Mary Alacoque, became public with the support of several understanding mothers superior and Jesuit priests, who enabled her to establish the devotion by legitimising and distributing symbolic images of the Sacred Heart and devotional manuals. In 1675 Alacoque underwent a revelation in which Jesus presented to her his heart, commanding her to "Behold this heart, which has loved men so much […] and in return I receive nothing but ingratitude". To make reparation for humanity's ungratefulness Jesus asked Alacoque for the Friday following the Feast of Corpus Christi to be spent in devotion to him – "for a special Feast to honour my heart".[23] Such a devotion to Christ's actual heart highlights a commingling of the physical and spiritual that places this practice on a strange cusp of fleshly fascination.

By making the beloved the focal point of his speaker's devotions, Rossetti's imagery reproduces the way in which Sacred Heart is often depicted, in art, as a heart aflame, radiating with divine light and bleeding punctured by the Holy Lance, alluding to Christ's crucifixion whilst the fire symbolizes the transformative power of His divine love. The image of the burning heart also connotes erotic passion, for instance, in *La Vita Nuova* Dante dreams that Love himself compels Beatrice to eat his flaming heart:

> And [Love] who held her also in his hand held a thing that was burning in flames; and he said to me, *Vide cor tuum* […] he set himself to awaken her that slept; after the which he made her to eat that thing which flamed in his hand; and she eat as one fearing […] all his joy was turned to into the most bitter weeping […] he went up with her towards heaven: whereby such great anguish came upon me that my light slumber could not endure it, but was suddenly broken.[24]

The heart aflame conveys Dante's all-consuming desire to be close to Beatrice – a desire so strong that his heart is literally devoured by his reluctant beloved. Dante's dream punishes his sexual desire for Beatrice, suggesting that it will inevitably lead to his self-destruction and sorrow in Hell: 'burning in flames' and the place of 'bitter weeping'. Dante also sublimates the threat of female sexuality, by preserving Beatrice's modesty and presenting her as an active participant in the sexual act (implicit in the eating) only when commanded by Love 'as one fearing', rather than reciprocating Dante's sexual interest of her own volition.

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[23] Morgan, David, *Sacred Heart of Jesus: the visual evolution of a devotion* (Amsterdam University Press, 2008), p.6.
[24] *DHC*, p.32

Rossetti in 'Love's Testament' fuses *eros* and *agape*, by depicting the speaker's encounter with his beloved as a spiritual heart-to-heart. He envisions the beloved *in persona Christi* with heart on 'fire' with the passion and spiritual force or 'testament' of His unconditional love. Thus, the beloved's body intimates Jesus' transformative love, by engendering spiritual love in the speaker and transmitting her 'grace' from one loving heart to all – as Rossetti says, it 'dost work deliverance'.

Rossetti also highlights how the beloved's all-encompassing association with the divine, in thought and deed ('intent' and 'speech') endows her with the supreme power to intercede on the lover's behalf and raise him up the Great Chain of Being, drawing him closer to God and to salvation:

> Of the deep stair thou tread'st to the dim shoal
> And weary water of the place of sighs,
> And there dost work deliverance, as thine eyes
> Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul!

Rossetti here re-enacts and re-configures Beatrice's descent to Dante at the end of *Purgatorio* by extending the reach of the beloved's redeeming power, beyond the Earthly Paradise to locate the speaker whom she finds at 'the dim shoal' recalling the 'deserted shore'[25] of Dante's Ante-Purgatory, 'which/ never saw any man sail its waters who afterwards/ experienced return'. [26]

Rossetti has his speaker replicate the experience of the late-repentant souls of the fifth canto, recalling:

> We were […] sinners until the last
> hour; then light from Heaven awakened us,
> so that, repenting and forgiving, we came forth
> from life at peace with God, who pierces our hearts
> with the desire to see him.[27]
>
> [Noi fummo […] peccatori infino a l'ultima ora;
> quivi lume del ciel ne fece accorti,
> sì che, pentendo e perdonando, fora
> di vita uscimmo a Dio pacificati,
> che del disio di sé veder n'accora.]

[25] *Purgatorio*, 1.130, p.25
[26] *Purgatorio*, 1.130-2, p.25
[27] *Purgatorio*, 5.52-57, pp.80-1.

Rossetti's speaker, like the late-repentant, is also reanimated by the 'light' of conversion at the opportune 'last hour' through a mystical vision of the Imparadised beloved. Rossetti similarly stresses the physicality of the beloved's heart, who is illuminated by divine 'fire' and fills the lover's 'heart' with a 'desire to see' and be possessed or 'owned' by herself and God. Hence, the sestet dramatizes the beloved's struggle for the speaker's 'spirit' at death.

While Dante's depiction seeks to emphasize God's boundless mercy, offered even to those who wait until the last hour to make peace with Him, Rossetti insists that it is only the 'eyes' and 'work' of the beloved that can free his speaker from his state of moral procrastination: on the cusp between Hell, and the prospect of deliverance. By locating his speaker on the threshold of Purgatory, Rossetti maximises the sense that he occupies (emotionally and physically) a state of spiritual suspension – neither here nor there – caught in a limbo within Limbo. In doing so, Rossetti magnifies the beloved's salvific agency, leaving the reader with the lasting image of the her eyes, his 'governing star'[28], acting as portals to direct and transport his unworthy 'prisoned spirit' to the realm of her blessed 'soul' and endowing him with grace, and endowing God with the glory of bringing him back into the fold.

Clearly attracted to narratives of late-repentance, Rossetti translated and illustrated the story of the Lady of Siena as told in the fifth canto of Dante's *Purgatorio*. He drafted this translation, making studies and composing the oil painting from the late 1860s until the last few months of his life. *La Pia De' Tolomei* (fig.8) depicts the tragic imprisonment of Pia, in a castle, in Maremma by her husband, who leaves her to die without receiving absolution.

[28] Gracious Moonlight, l.5, p.136

Fig. 8 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *La Pia De' Tolomei*, 1868-80. Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, KS.

Rossetti inscribed the frame with Pia's words to Dante's pilgrim:

> Ah! When on earth thy voice again is heard,
> And thou from the long road hast rested thee
> (After the second spirit said the third),
> Remember me who am La Pia; me
> Siena, me Maremma, made, unmade
> This in his inmost heart well knoweth he
> With whose fair jewel I was ringed and wed.[29]

Dante's Pia offers a suppressed account of domestic abuse, inverting the enthusiasm and loquaciousness with which Francesca da Rimini tells the story of her infidelity in the fifth canto of *Inferno*, so that the reader gets no sense of her personality or emotions but a carefully wrought invocation to 'Remember' her and her fate. Pia displays a chillingly controlled and detached calm, though it is with a deep bitterness and regret that she recalls her husband's neglect of their marriage vows. In life, Pia was compelled to die un-absolved: in the afterlife she is, as yet, unable to forget or absolve herself from earthly wrongdoing. Dante suggests that while spiritually Pia transcends

[29] As quoted in Russell Ash, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Pavillion, 1997), plate.24.

all earthly strife, she cannot let go of a sense of complicity in the crimes of her husband.

Rossetti's composition echoes this sense of confinement, resentment, and commemoration with the wistful and melancholic Jane Morris, positioned uncomfortably hunched over, transfixed by something that the viewer cannot see – perhaps a memory of times past or visions of missed opportunities – all the while worrying her wedding ring. Hemmed in by crawlers of ivy (a symbol of memory) its dark foliage contrasting with the stark paleness of her skin, Rossetti represents Pia stuck in a state of life-in-death from which, as the unyielding wall behind her reinforces, she cannot escape. Her haunted look recalls the visions that swim before the speaker of 'A Superscription' (1881): "Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been;/ I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell […] Sleepless with cold commemorative eyes'.[30] This heightened state of nostalgia and suspended animation is reinforced in a recently discovered preparatory drawing for 'La Pia de Tolomei' (fig.9), an early study for the oil painting produced in 1868, with Alexa Wilding as the model whose inclined face looks nostalgically out of the canvas.[31]

Fig. 9 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'La Pia de Tolomei', 1868. Fitzwilliam Museum Collection, Cambridge.

Perhaps this was the study of Pia that Swinburne saw at the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1868, when he wrote: 'In [Pia's] eyes is a strange look of wonder and sorrow and

[30] 'A Superscription', *CW*, ll.1-14 p.323-4.
[31] 'Rossetti drawing found in Edinburgh bookshop to go on display', *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/nov/26/pre-raphaelite-painter-rossetti-drawing-bookshop> [accessed 26 November 2018].

fatigue, without fear and without pain, as though she were even now looking beyond earth into the soft and sad air of purgatory'.[32] Looking at the drawing and the oil painting alongside each other, then, emphasizes the sense that purgatory is a condition of the soul seeking release from emotional turmoil and one's sorrow without fear or pain.

Rossetti resurrects episodes and subjects from the liminal spaces in Dante's *Purgatorio*, by remaking them in the image of Newman's Purgatory, in order to test the emotional limits of Catholicism and charge them with the emotional difficulties they present for the living (and who, like the late-repentant can only wait and yearn for the possibility of redemption). Rossetti's purgatory is a purgatory of the mind in which divine assistance is much desired, awaited, and figured in terms of the arrival of Dante's Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise.

'I am as the center of the circle […] but with thee it is not thus'[33]: the gaze, reunion and delayed gratification.

In Rossetti's translation of Dante's *La Vita Nuova* he offers, as an editorial gloss, a significant interpretation of Dante's symbolic use of the circle and its centre. At this juncture in Dante's narrative, Beatrice has denied Dante her salutation (by refusing to look at him) the pain of which causes Love himself to appear to Dante in a dream. Love seeks to console and counsel Dante, which Love expresses through the image of the circle and its centre:

> And [Love] made answer to me: 'Ego tanquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferential partes: tu autem non sic'+ And thinking upon his words they seemed to me obscure; so that again compelling myself unto speech, I asked of him: 'What thing is this, Master, that thou hast spoken thus darkly?' To the which he made answer in the vulgar tongue: "Demand no more than may be useful to thee."
>
> […]
>
> +"I am as the centre of the circle, to which all parts of the circumference bear an equal relation: but with thee it is not thus." This phrase seems to have remained obscure to commentators as Dante found it at the

[32] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition, 1868* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), pp.49-50.
[33] *NL*, p.48.

> moment. No one, as far as I know, has even fairly tried to find a meaning for it. To me the following seems not an unlikely one. Love is weeping on Dante's account, not on his own. He says, 'I am the centre of the circle (Amor che move il sole e l 'altre stella'): therefore all loveable objects, whether in heaven or earth, or any part of the circle's circumference, are equally near to me. Not so thou, who wilt one day lose Beatrice when she goes to Heaven.' The phrase would thus contain an intimation of the death of Beatrice, accounting for Dante being told next not to inquire the meaning of the speech, - "Demand no more than may be useful to thee."[34]

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation and commentary of this episode is uncharacteristically tentative as he suggests 'the following to me seems not […] unlikely'. Nevertheless, it proves to be illuminating as he identifies the peculiarity of this image, both to critics and even to Dante, who seem to have difficulty deciphering its meaning. This is because Rossetti links this encounter with the pilgrim's final vision in *Paradiso*, a canticle in which the image of the eye or circle and its centre assumes increasing importance. It represents the relation of the individual soul with God (who sees all of creation in the present, at once), the entire structure of the cosmos that revolves around a central point of light (the Godhead that makes up the centre of the celestial Rose) but also the relationship between the pilgrim and his beloved Beatrice whom he and all characters continually refer to by her teleporting eyes. Rossetti draws attention to the peculiar significance of this image, its association with and resolution in the *Commedia* and exposes in his watercolour *The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Paradise*[35] (fig.10) the underlying tensions between sight and insight, flesh and spirit, that invigorate Dante's depiction of the reunion between the pilgrim and Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise.

[34] *NL*, p.48-9.
[35] Henceforth, *The Meeting*.

Fig. 10 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Paradise*, 1853-4. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

In Dante Gabriel Rossetti's watercolour *The Meeting*, he presents the moment of the reunion of Dante and Beatrice as a meeting of each other's gaze. Steve Ellis and Suzanne Waldman have suggested that when Rossetti depicts this episode from the *Commedia* he merely recasts the first salutation of Beatrice from *La Vita Nuova*, pointing towards his 1859 oil painting *The Salutation of Beatrice* (fig.1) to stress that there he makes no real distinction between his portrayal of heaven and earth.[36] For Ellis, this indicates that Rossetti's interpretation of the *Commedia* is overshadowed by his 'complete bias'[37] for *La Vita Nuova*, leading him to render the encounter in Paradise fleshly, narcissistic (in the sense that it confirms Rossetti's own interpretation of their relationship), and as Alison Milbank puts it: 'make[s] Beatrice respond more erotically to Dante'.[38] Such misreading of Rossetti, however, overlooks the striking similarities between Rossetti's adaptations and Dante's representation of this episode.

[36] Ellis, pp.113-115 and Waldman, pp.77-81.
[37] Ellis, p.115.
[38] Milbank, p.221.

Nonetheless, in both *The Meeting* (fig.10) and *The Salutation of Beatrice* (fig.1) Rossetti's attention to detail of Dante's portrayal of the Earthly Paradise is marked by the lush, verdurous excess and fecundity of Eden. *The Salutation of Beatrice* frames Beatrice in flowers, accurately recreating the angelic 'cloud of flowers […] rising and falling back within and without'[39] ['una nuvola di fiori […] saliva e ricadeva in giù dentro e di fòri'] that surround Dante and Beatrice, and the background of both paintings are entirely enclosed by foliage, blocking out the light. This is a fact which the pilgrim explicitly observes in *Purgatorio*: 'the divine forest, thick and alive'[40] ['la divina foresta spessa e viva'], and 'dark under the perpetual shade, which never lets sun or moon shine through.'[41] ['bruna sotto l'ombra perpetüa'] and again in *The Meeting* the couple are faithfully illustrated in a clearing 'in the open air' ['l'aere apero']. [42] Moreover, the figure of Beatrice in *The Meeting* is illustrated with notable precision: the pilgrim describes how 'her white veil girt with olive,/ a lady appeared to me, clothed, beneath a green mantle, in the color/ of living flame'[43] ['sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva/ donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto/ vestita di color di fiamma viva.'] and surrounded by a golden glow, echoing the pilgrim's description of Beatrice unveiled: 'O splendor of eternal, living light' ['O isplendor di viva luce etterna']. [44] Rossetti depicts Beatrice as radiating divine light, a light shared in part by her handmaidens, carrying psalteries on her left and right – their medieval musical instruments may serve to reflect the singing of the angels[45] and singing of the theological virtues[46] that surrounds Beatrice.

However, it is fair to say that Rossetti does depart from a literal reading of Dante's episode. As Milbank suggests, Beatrice appears 'on the closer side of the river-bank, and showing herself unveiled to her lover's approval, rather than arriving in full allegorical style in a chariot, veiled and surrounded by angels'[47] leaving us guessing as to what a painting in 'full allegorical style' might look like. However, Rossetti brings to light something in Dante's *Purgatorio* that is often taken for granted, which

[39] *Purgatorio*, 30.28-30, pp.510-1.
[40] *Purgatorio*, 28.2, pp.474-5.
[41] *Purgatorio*, 28.31-33, pp.476-7.
[42] *Purgatorio*, 31.145, pp.536-7.
[43] *Purgatorio*, 30-31-3, pp.512-3.
[44] *Purgatorio*, 31.139, pp.536-7.
[45] *Purgatorio*, 30.91-6, pp.514-5.
[46] *Purgatorio*, 31.112, pp.536-7.
[47] Milbank, p.221.

is that the reader is expecting to see the version of Dante and Beatrice's reunion that Rossetti gives us – their true reunion as the meeting of their gaze. Far from being a Pre-Raphaelite creation, this meeting of the gaze registers strongly in Dante through Virgil's first mention of Beatrice's eyes. In this sense, Rossetti does not fabricate a moment, rather he faithfully renders the setting of the Earthly Paradise, the pilgrim's descriptions of Beatrice (both veiled and unveiled) and in particular he stays close to the climax of their original encounter – the quiet, understated return of each other's eyes.

Contrary to Milbank's contention then, Beatrice's 'eyes need not always be turned earthwards'[48] (*Beata Beatrix* is an obvious example against this in any case), and here, instead of giving a literal rendering, Rossetti chooses to depict the moment Dante and Beatrice truly meet – a moment the reader of the *Commedia* is made to expect and is denied – as a meeting of their eyes.

Rossetti thus emphasizes the significance not only of Dante and Beatrice's reunion as a meeting of one another's eyes but the image of the circle and its centre to Dante's poetical works from *La Vita Nuova* through to *Paradiso*. What Rossetti reveals in *La Vita Nuova* is the sense that Dante (without Beatrice's salutation) is left feeling excluded, off-centre, rejected from Love's comforting embrace, the physical embodiment of which – i.e. her reciprocated gaze – has been denied him. He also implies that this moment foreshadows the greatest barrier to their Love, that of her death.

What this means is that Rossetti explicitly makes the link with Dante's conception of Love in *Paradiso*, highlighting Rossetti's understanding of Love as always returning to the Love of God. By the end of *Paradiso*, we see the resolution that Rossetti is drawing attention to; not just the loss of Beatrice in this life, but her recovery – and with her, the recovery of Dante's spiritual harmony, feeling of oneness and a re-centring of Dante within the circle:

> Here my imagining failed of power; but
> already my desire and the *velle* were turned, like
> a wheel being moved evenly,

[48] Milbank, p.221.

by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.[49]

[A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa,
ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l *velle*,
sì come rota ch' igualmente è mossa,
l'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.]

For Dante and Rossetti, it is in the Earthly Paradise that the lover anticipates his reconciliation with the beloved – a reunion which prefigures and ultimately recovers man's original relationship with God. Thus, the fulfilment of the lover's ultimate desire is promised but deferred – so that he remains in a heightened state of anticipation until he arrives in Heaven.

Dante's *Commedia* sets up the reader to anticipate the reunion of the pilgrim and Beatrice specifically as the meeting of their eyes, as an allegory for the union of Christ and the human soul, and as a glorious spectacle. Before the pilgrim or the reader has even encountered Beatrice, in the opening cantos of *Inferno*, Dante uses Virgil's framing narration to establish an intrinsic link between the power of her sight and divine intercession. Virgil describes being 'command[ed]'[50] ['comandare'] by this 'angelic'[51] ['angelica'] lady to intervene in the pilgrim's journey, locating divine authority in her eyes which, we are told, 'were shining brighter than the morning star' ['Lucevan li occhi suoi più che la stella'].[52] They herald the arrival of the dawn, a way out of the obscurity of the 'dark wood'[53] ['selva oscura'], and a return to the light and love of God. Virgil renders Beatrice's eyes guiding lights by which the pilgrim might navigate the celestial spheres, surpassing the brilliance of the planet Venus (goddess of Love) and unwittingly associates her with Jesus, described in Revelation as 'the bright and morning star'.[54] Hence, she contains within her gaze both the classical and the Christian traditions, encapsulating the whole historical span of man's moral teaching from what *was* in antiquity to what *will be* the eternal life to come. This suggests from the outset that it will be by the grace and generosity of Beatrice's gaze

[49] *Paradiso*, 33.142-145, p.666-7.
[50] *Inferno*, 2.54, pp.42-3.
[51] *Inferno*, 2.57, pp.42-3.
[52] *Inferno*, 2.55, pp.42-3.
[53] *Inferno*, 1.2, pp.26-7.
[54] Revelation 22.16: 'I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and offspring of David, and the bright and morning star'.

that the pilgrim will find clarity of vision (Wisdom), spiritual direction (Revelation) and a devotion defying earthly expectations.

From the opening cantos of *Inferno*, Dante establishes Beatrice's divinely sanctioned mission to intercede on the pilgrim's behalf and guide him out of obscurity. He has Beatrice reveal her divine credentials through association, imitation, and self-awareness. She claims a fellowship with Saint Lucy, the Virgin Mary and the risen Christ, echoing the latter's speech: 'your misery does not touch me' ['la vostra miseria non mi tange'].[55] Her use of 'tange' (from the verb tangere, to touch) reflects Christ's words to Mary Magdalen: 'Noli me tangere' ('Do not touch me').[56] Moreover, Beatrice finds herself enacting the resurrection, divulging her anxiety for the pilgrim's plight: 'I am afraid […] I have risen too late to help him' ['mi sia tardi al soccorso levata'].[57] She is also aware her intercessory role, commanding Virgil to act as the pilgrim's guide in Hell: 'I am Beatrice who cause you to go […] love has moved me and makes me speak' [I' son Beatrice che ti faccio andare […] amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare.'].[58] Dante introduces Beatrice's threefold stamp of legitimacy to sanctify his writing of the *Commedia*, but also her ability to act as intermediary on behalf of the entirety of Heaven. The 'love' that moves Beatrice will, in the closing lines of *Paradiso*, be revealed as synonymous with the pilgrim's beatific vision of God, foreshadowing that her guiding vision and speech will be able to act as an agent of Christ's salvific power – healing, reviving and operating in the guise of 'the Love that moves the sun and the other stars'. Once Virgil finishes recounting Beatrice's intervention he returns to describing: 'her shining eyes, shedding tears'[59] ['li occhi lucent lagrimando'] so that the image of her eyes become the beginning and end of his account, but also drive him to act, making him 'quicker to come here' ['venir più presto'].[60]

The need for visualisation is endemic in the *Commedia*. Virgil portrays Beatrice's eyes as the catalyst for the pilgrim's spiritual maturation. She becomes a conduit for the pilgrim's glimpse of the Gryphon (a mythical creature with the body of a lion and

[55] *Inferno*, 2.91-2, pp.44-5.
[56] *Inferno*, n.91, p.51.
[57] *Inferno*, 2.64-5, pp.42-3.
[58] *Inferno*, 2.70-72, pp.44-5.
[59] *Inferno*, 2.116, pp.46-7.
[60] *Inferno*, 2.117, pp.46-7.

head and wings of an eagle) whose duality represents the dual human and divine nature of Christ. This divine sight reflected in her eyes prefigures the pilgrim's vision of the Godhead, which is only possible via Beatrice's instructing vision. Finally, her eyes facilitate the pilgrim's ascent through each of the Heavenly spheres, literally drawing him closer to God and salvation. At key thresholds or boundaries in the pilgrim's upward journey, Dante has his characters invoke the name and image of Beatrice. The pilgrim is only moved to cross the purgatorial fire when Virgil implores him: 'Now see, son: between you and Beatrice is this wall' ["Or vedi, figlio:/ tra Bëactrice e te è questo muro."].[61] Virgil stresses that not only does the pilgrim have to 'see' (from Italian vedere : to see, look at, go over, check, find out, grasp) to comprehend his words but that for the pilgrim to move forward he must exercise his interpretative faculties to review his initial 'imagining'[62] ['imaginando'] of the purgatorial fire. This fire, unlike that associated with his life on earth: 'human bodies […] [he] had in the past seen burning'[63] ['umani corpi già veduti accesi'], should be reimagined, through the classical myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, consigning the 'torment'[64] ['tormento'] of its flames to a 'wall'[65] ['muro'] a physical and literary obstacle that can be surmounted and has been linguistically re-construed. This suggests that the pilgrim's sight relies not only on sensory experience but literary interpretation – Dante's meta-narrative here seems to suggest that if the pilgrim can, through an act of imaginative identification and translation, understand the obstacle to Beatrice in terms of another tragic narrative, he can muster the courage to act as its hero.

Finally, at Virgil's departure he leaves the pilgrim and the reader with a lasting image, suggesting that the pilgrim will soon be under the instruction of one who can 'discern […] further', replacing Beatrice's name with what has now become her defining characteristic, Virgil declares: 'Until the lovely eyes arrive in their gladness which weeping made me come to you' ['Mentre che vegnan lieti li occhi belli/ che lagrimando a te venir mi fenno,/ seder ti puoi e puoi andar tra elli.'].[66] Virgil synecdochally refers to Beatrice as a pair of eyes to emphasize that not only is it her approving gaze that the pilgrim yearns for but the insight (wisdom) contained within

[61] *Purgatorio*, 27.25-6, pp.458-9
[62] *Purgatorio*, 27.17, pp.456-7.
[63] Purgatorio, 27.17-18, pp.456-7.
[64] Purgatorio, 27. 20, pp.456-7.
[65] *Purgatorio*, 27.36, p.458-9.
[66] *Purgatorio*, 27.136-8, pp.462-3.

them and her mutual 'gladness' in seeing him for which he longs. Virgil's last act upon leaving the pilgrim is a curious one. He crowns him,[67] suggesting that in the absence of sin he is fit to rule or govern himself (having been cleansed of his appetites), placing the pilgrim within a circular figure (as its centre) and prefiguring the pattern of imagery that will dominate the rest of this canticle and *Paradiso*.

Moreover, Dante creates a link between Beatrice's impending reunion with the pilgrim and mankind's reunion with Christ at the end of the world, in order to reveal her role as a figure for Christ but also to highlight the reciprocal nature of man's desire for the ultimate. After undergoing purgation, the pilgrim hears Christ's words at the Last Judgement: 'Venite, benedicti Patris mei' [Come, ye blessed of my Father][68] welcoming the righteous into Heaven. On crossing this threshold, he is met with an apocalyptic salutation, heralding the end of time and a spiritual reckoning, displaying God reaching out to his creation and expressing his mutual desire for the blessed. This is further emphasized in Dante's placement of the advent of Beatrice as the culmination of a celestial extravaganza – at the halting of an apocalyptic procession – during which he has a single voice summon the bride of Christ (recalling the Song of Songs), but singing a modified version: 'Come from Lebanon my bride, come from Lebanon, come, you will be crowned'.[69]

Dante's allusion to the Song of Songs (a biblical celebration of conjugal sex) prefigures the pilgrim's literal reunion with Beatrice (his beloved), and a mystical union between Christ and human soul at the end of the world. Thus, Dante stresses the dually divine and erotic dimension of Dante and Beatrice's encounter.

As I discuss in my Introduction, successive Biblical authors and commentators have adopted a metaphor of marriage to express God's love for man. In particular the Song of Songs was singled out, within ascetic and mystical traditions from Origen onwards, so that the conjugal love it depicts between husband and wife became an allegory for Christ's love for his bride (the Church), or God's love for the individual human soul. Nowhere is the sensuality of this marital allegory more stressed than in the mystical

[67] *Purgatorio*, 27.145, pp.462-3.
[68] *Purgatorio*, 2, n.58, p.467.
[69] *Purgatorio*, 30, n.11, pp.518-9.

writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, who makes an unexpected appearance as the pilgrim's guide for the last three cantos of Dante's *Paradiso*, and crucially facilitates the pilgrim's Beatific vision of God. As such, Bernard's allegorical reading may help elucidate Dante's allusion to the Song of Songs in Canto XXX. Dante dramatizes Beatrice's arrival as both an answering of the call to the bride of Christ, who hungers for union with God, and the advent of the 'bridegroom' because in her Christ-likeness she reflects and safely sublimates the pilgrim's desire for the ultimate and for occupying the feminine position of the 'bride'.

In doing so, Dante avoids the potential sexual transgression of having the pilgrim imagine himself in the feminine position, i.e. as the bride of Christ – offering himself as a vessel to be filled by Christ's divine love – instead Beatrice fulfils this role for him through her Christ-like double nature. Dante creates a parallel allegory between the pilgrim's desire for reunion with Beatrice and the individual human soul's desire for return to their origins, for a reunion with the Creator, desiring the God who first desired us. Hence, Dante anchors the desire for the ultimate in the pilgrim's concrete relationship with his beloved in order to highlight that the soul's yearning for union for God is often, and can be sensibly, understood and expressed in sensuous and even sexual terms.

For Dante and Rossetti, Beatrice's arrival in the Earthly Paradise ultimately signals the restoration not only the lover's relationship with the beloved but man's original relationship with God. However, the build-up to this reunion in Canto XXX is fraught one, full of liminal emotional states, in which the pilgrim yearns for reconciliation with Beatrice, anticipating her arrival (yet even when she does arrive he cannot, at first, meet her gaze) so his desire is continually being stoked with the promise of fulfilment that is agonizingly slow to arrive. By using the reunion with the beloved as an analogy for union with God, Dante and Rossetti render her a site for delayed gratification. Although Rossetti's speaker is less able to resist the beloved's physical charms than Dante's pilgrim, his ultimate desire for God is kindled, with satisfaction assured (by the beloved) yet persistently delayed.

Just as Dante figures Beatrice as the First and Last cause, proclaiming the Apocalypse, Rossetti depicts the beloved as the Alpha and Omega of his speaker's worldview,

locating in her eyes the sensual source and goal of divine love.[70] Rossetti has his speaker of 'Love's Nocturn' look into his beloved's eyes and find there the spiritual promise and power to raise him up the Great Chain of Being: 'Lamps of an auspicious soul: O their glance is lofiest dole […] Wherein Love descries his goal'.[71] All Rossetti's speakers have a need to translate the spiritual, boundless and transformative power of love into something visual, material and plottable. This drive is persistent over the course of *The House of Life*: in the 'The Kiss' the speaker glimpses his immortal soul through the portals of his beloved's eyes, becoming 'A spirit when her spirit looked through me […] Fire within fire, desire in deity'[72] experiencing his burning love for the beloved mystically embraced by divine illumination and revealing his original desire 'in deity'. In 'Gracious Moonlight', Rossetti portrays the beloved as the guiding light of his speaker's spiritual progression:

> Even as the moon grows queenlier in mid-space
> When the sky darkens, and her cloud-rapt car
> Thrills with intenser radiance from afar,—
> So lambent, lady, beams thy sovereign grace
> When the drear soul desires thee. Of that face
> What shall be said,—which, like a governing star,
> Gathers and garners from all things that are
> Their silent penetrative loveliness?
>
> O'er water-daisies and wild waifs of Spring,
> There where the iris rears its gold-crowned sheaf
> With flowering rush and sceptred arrow-leaf,
> So have I marked Queen Dian, in bright ring
> Of cloud above and wave below, take wing
> And chase night's gloom, as thou the spirit's grief.[73]

Rossetti suggests that the beloved possesses unique Beatricean powers of creation and attraction, being able to concurrently draw 'all things that are' towards her and endow them with their essential 'loveliness'. It is the beloved's 'sovereign grace', her Christ-like salvific agency, that enables her to orient the speaker's 'drear soul' away from the 'night's gloom' and towards the superabundance of the Earthly Paradise, which he imagines in an outpouring of fecund floral imagery 'water-daisies', 'wild waifs of Spring', 'iris' and 'flowering rush'. Hence, the beloved, acting on behalf of her lover,

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[70] For Beatrice as heralding the Apocalypse, see amongst others Charles Singleton, *Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958) and Robert Durling and Ronald Martinez, 'Rolling out the Apocalypse (Cantos 29-33)' in *Purgatorio*, pp.623-626.
[71] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, ll.39-42, p.228.
[72] 'The Kiss', *CW*, ll.11-14, p.278.
[73] 'Gracious Moonlight', *CW*, p.286.

can ‘take wing’, transporting him from his earthly tribulations, to a state of ‘intenser radiance’ in which desire can hold off grief.

Furthermore, in ‘Mid-Rapture’ the speaker heralds through the beloved’s ‘summoning eyes’ the advent of a new dawn, or even millennium:

> Thou lovely and beloved, thou my love:
> Whose kiss seems still the first, whose summoning eyes,
> Even now, as for our love-world’s new sunrise,
> Shed very dawn; whose voice, attuned above
> All modulation of the deep-bowered dove,
> Is like a hand laid softly on the soul […][74]

The speaker addresses the beloved as Love’s holy trinity (‘lovely’ ‘beloved and ‘my love’) announcing her arrival in a blaze of glory akin to the millennial coming of Christ in Revelation, ‘the bright and morning star’.[75] She radiates ‘very dawn’ (divine love) and sounds in harmony with the music of the spheres as ‘a full/ Grand burst of music, which the crowned Seven/ Must have leaned sideways in their seats to fix’[76], harking back to the seven spirits of God.[77] Rossetti endows the beloved with the creative power to incarnate and regulate the salvific agency of the ‘deep-bowered dove’ (symbolising peace, the rejuvenated earth after the Flood, baptism and the Holy Spirit[78]) which offers his ‘soul’ comfort and the chance to touch the invisible. In her eyes the speaker finds John’s vision of redeemed humanity in Revelation, ‘a new heaven and a new earth’[79], in which the image of the horizon (meeting of the sky and the sea) is eclipsed by the crystalline reflections of Paradise, subsuming and enclosing him in divine light ‘till I am mirrored there/ Light-circled in a heaven of deep-drawn rays’.[80] As such, Rossetti shows how the beloved eyes prophesize reunion with God in Heaven – as encirclement in divine light – recalling the pilgrim’s vision of the Celestial Rose: ‘So, standing above the light and all around,/ I saw reflections from more than a thousand tiers/ Of those of us who had got back there’ [‘sì soprastando al

[74] ‘Mid-Rapture’, *CW*, ll.1-6, p.289.
[75] KJV, Revelation 22.16: ‘I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and offspring of David, and the bright and morning star’, p.303
[76] *WDGR*, ll. 10-22, p.266.
[77] Revelation 4.5: And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne which are the seven Spirits of God.
[78] Matthew 3.16: And Jesus, when he was baptised, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him.
[79] Revelation 21.1: And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.
[80] ‘Mid-Rapture’, ll.11-12, p.289.

lume, intorno intorno,/ vidi specchiarsi in più di mille soglie/ quanto di noi là sù fatto ha ritorno']. [81] Thus, Rossetti conveys that the transformative power of God's love has been written in nature and the physical body of the beloved, which implies that it can be read and analysed in visual form, like a map, giving the speaker the power to comprehend and follow its course.

Rossetti's beloved may prophesize redemption and union with God but the fulfilment of this promise is continually delayed, leaving the speaker in a state of anticipation, and in this he reflects Beatrice's meeting with the pilgrim in Canto XXX. Dante sets up the reader to anticipate the true reunion of the pilgrim and Beatrice as the meeting of one another's gaze but disrupts this by fashioning a series of shrouds to keep her from his direct view. In his first glimpse of his beloved, the pilgrim observes:

> So, within a cloud of flowers that from
> the hands of the angels was rising and falling back,
> within and without,
> her white veil girt with olive, a lady appeared to
> me, clothed, beneath a green mantle, in the color
> of living flame[82]
>
> [cosí, dentro una nuvola di fiori
> che de la mani angeliche saliva
> e ricadeva in giú dentro e di fori
> sovra candido vel cinta d'uliva
> donna m'apparve, sotto verde manto
> vestita fi color di fiamma viva]

Dante draws attention to the pilgrim's restricted view because he sees only 'a lady': generic, undifferentiated, apparently unable to distinguish between her or any other lady he has come across on his journey so far. He is limited to describing only her multiple veils – notably she is thrice enfolded by a celestial covering ('cloud of flowers'), a face covering ('white veil girt with olive') encircling her head and 'clothed'. Dante's repeated use of 'dentro' (within) and his placement of the verb 'vestita' (clothed) at the start of the sentence underscores the sense that Beatrice is enclosed, out of reach, inaccessible, even as the pilgrim begins to catch sight of her inner light 'the color of living flame' he comes up against an added layer of

[81] *Paradiso*, 30.112-4, pp.616-7.
[82] *Purgatorio*, 30.28-33, pp.510-3.

concealment in the form of a 'green mantle'. Yet, in his focus on describing her various veils the pilgrim also visually suggests a gradual entry 'within', so that while he is denied an unencumbered view of Beatrice, his fixation over her trappings hints at the slow almost teasing unveiling that will eventually take place.

Dante seeks to distance the passages from eroticism, perhaps to avoid over-sentimentalizing the moment, or perhaps to be consistent with the wayfarer's spiritual progression (having just been purged of all sins it would seem misplaced for the wayfarer to indulge in pleasures, voyeuristic, or otherwise of the flesh). However, he simultaneously undermines this through the lengthy, lingering descriptions of Beatrice's hidden face – slowly, agonizingly unveiled – the pattern of censure, denial, building anticipation, gaining limited sight of her smile, then eventual sight of her eyes, heightens the inevitable sensuality of what becomes a drawn-out erotic spectacle, which through its self-conscious emphasis on controlling his wayfarer's vision of Beatrice, only serves to draw attention to the power of his objectifying vision, which, although curbed, ultimately remains intact.

Rossetti amplifies the delay in gratification Dante's pilgrim experiences in Canto XXX, by stressing the distance that must be overcome in order for his lover to reunite with his dead beloved. This is a distance that Rossetti's poetic speakers are keenly aware of and is epitomized in his poem of 1869 'The Portrait'. Notably, this work hinges on being a double work because it is typically associated with Rossetti's mystical masterpiece *Beata Beatrix* (fig.11), which depicts Beatrice experiencing an ecstatic vision of her ascension to Heaven.[83] As Rossetti states in a letter of 1873 to William Graham, he intended to depict Beatrice not at the moment of her death but transformed by a 'trance or sudden spiritual transfiguration. Beatrice is rapt visibly into Heaven, seeing as it were through her shut lids'.[84]

[83] 'The Portrait', *The Rossetti Archive*, ed. by Jerome McGann. < http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/50-1869.raw.html> [accessed 22 November 2019].
[84] *Fredeman*, VI, 73.76, p.89.

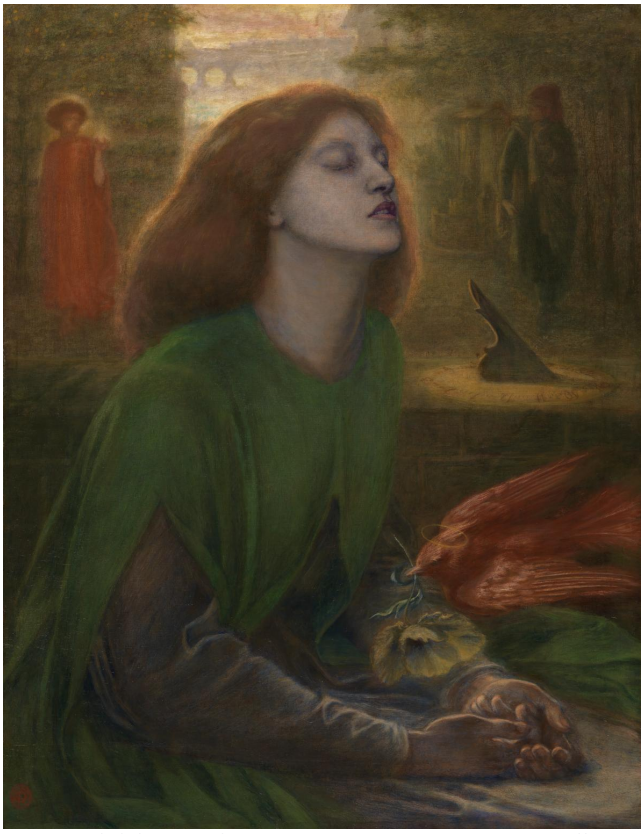

Fig. 11 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*, 1864-1870. Tate Gallery, London.

However, I will argue that Rossetti's composition of 'The Portrait' suggests a more likely pairing with Dante's reunion with Beatrice in Eden, which Rossetti depicts in *The Meeting* (fig.10). In the poem, Rossetti demonstrates how the speaker's desire for reunion with his dead beloved traverses the distance between heaven and earth through his artistic rendering of her picture. In doing so, Rossetti recasts Dante's live show in Canto XXX as an erotically-charged still life. Rossetti sets up the reader to see and feel everything through the lens of his speaker's subjectivity:

> This is her picture as she was
> It seems a thing to wonder on
> As though mine image in the glass
> Should tarry when myself am gone.
> I gaze until she seems to stir, –
> Until mine eyes almost aver
> That now, even now, the sweet lips part
> To breathe the words of the sweet heart: –
> And yet the earth is over her. [85]

[85] 'The Portrait', *CW*, ll.1-9, p.185.

Rossetti sets up the beloved as a spectacle for the speaker's and the reader's viewing pleasure, possessing and savouring 'mine image', displaying the physicality of it and playing with it, emphasising the omnipotent power of the artist's 'gaze' who controls the beloved's image in life 'as she was' and determines how all others view her in death (recalling Rossetti's sonnet of the same name of 1881: 'They that would look on her must come to me'). [86]

Rossetti suggests that the artist's power extends from beyond the grave because the speaker might yet breathe new life into his picture, gazing until: 'even now, the sweet lips part/ To breathe the words of the sweet heart'. The speaker enacts a kind of pseudo-resurrection or ventriloquism, by building the beloved up, breaking her down and suggesting a reciprocity of desire, which perhaps implies that she is complicit in (so to speak) making a spectacle of herself. Thus not only does the reader participate in the artistic spectacle, but the beloved seems to partake in her own objectification.

However, Rossetti demonstrates that the artist's view of this portrait is not direct or unencumbered, by fashioning, like Dante does, a series of veils between himself and the beloved. Rossetti accomplishes this by instilling an ambiguity into whether 'mine image' refers to the portrait itself, or the speaker's physical reflection in the glass. Rossetti conflates the idea of the artwork as a reflection of the artist, and the reflection of the artist as superimposed on the artwork in order to distance the beloved from the artist (who is separated by the interpretive filter of his mind, his reflected image, and his image of the portrait). Martin A. Danahay argues, amongst others, that Rossetti's experimentation with mirror images is indicative of a peculiarly nineteenth-century tendency to use women as 'a mirror of masculine desire, reflecting back at the male-viewer narcissistic tendencies that could not be represented directly'.[87] For Danahay, Rossetti in 'The Portrait' elides the concrete reality of the dead woman altogether,

[86] 'The Portrait', *CW*, l.14, p.281.
[87] Danahay, Martin A., 'Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation', *Victorian Poetry*, 32:1, 1994, 35. For 'The Portrait' as 'narcissistic self-projection', see also Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision*, p.159 and Waldman, *The Demon & the Damozel: Dynamics of Desire in the Works of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* p.72. Waldman contends that Rossetti's sonnet sequence *The House of Life* utilizes a kind of '"secondary narcissism" […] the result of which is that the subject never feels entirely distinct from the other, or entirely whole, and so fixes onto the other as an organizing ideal that ends up intimidating and diminishing him'.

substituting her representation with his own reflection in order to live out his own vain desires through her image:

> The shift from the woman in the painting to the viewer here is subtle. Rossetti is discussing the way in which art stops time and memorializes the dead but instead of saying that the painting is like a mirror of a dead woman (which would suggest realism) he uses the image of his own reflection preserved through the medium of the painting as a mirror (which suggests that it is self-referential) […] This is not simply Narcissus gazing at his own reflection but Pygmalion using art to create an image in his own likeness […] Rossetti is using the feminized other as a medium through which to represent himself.[88]

However, the problem with Danahay's approach is that it suggests that the artist's portrait of the dead beloved purports to a strict kind of realism (that the artist erases to reflect and indulge in himself), which is especially odd as the speaker makes no such claim to commemorate her as she is rather as 'she was', a romanticized memory of the artist, which is roundly shattered by the crushing reality of the line: 'And yet the earth is over her'. As J. Hillis Miller observes about attempts to unravel the complexity of mirrored representation in Rossetti's work: it 'is a complexity that cannot be unified. It remains incoherent or heterogenous, always doubled and redoubled in repetitions that subvert rather than reinforce […] How can one name this except reductively, or in a figure that refigures the problem?'.[89] Rossetti makes clear that neither his speaker's remembrance, representation of or self-reflection in the beloved are stable categories – or images we should take at face value. Rossetti purposefully reveals how his speaker's perception of the beloved is encumbered by his interpretation and construction of her. As such, even if the speaker were describing the picture, he cannot see past his own handiwork to find the 'thing' itself that is the true form of his beloved. Yet, the uncanniness of 'mine image' does not trap the artist in a solipsistic prison of his mind (until all he sees are 'soulless self-reflections of man's skill'[90]) because Rossetti suggests that the speaker is self-conscious concerning the constructed-ness of his vision:

> Alas! even such the thin-drawn ray
> That makes prison-depths more rude, –
> The drip of water night and day
> Giving a tongue to solitude.
> Yet this, of all love's perfect prize,

[88] Danahay, pp.41-2
[89] Miller, J. Hillis, 'The Mirror's Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art', *Victorian Poetry*, 29:4, 1991, p.131.
[90] 'Old and New Art: 1. St Luke the Painter', *CW*, l.11, p.313.

Remains save what in mournful guise,
  Takes counsel with my soul alone,
  Save what is secret and unknown
Below the earth, above the skies.[91]

Rossetti suggests that his speaker is all too aware that in composing his portrait his 'thin-drawn ray' has rendered the beloved's fleshliness, her 'prison-depths' (recalling the 'body's prisons bars'[92] of 'Dante at Verona') more apparent. Moreover, the speaker understands that the erotic fantasy he imagined gazing at the painting is illusory because it only appears 'to stir', yet he is also aware that his crude representation is 'now' all he has that can awaken his imaginative or spiritual life: 'Giving a tongue to solitude'.

Rossetti portrays his speaker in a state of spiritual, emotional and psychological liminality, suspended between his 'mournful guise' and wishing for immortality as 'though mine image in the glass/Should tarry when myself am gone', stuck in an existential crisis about what happens to the 'soul' after death. The speaker portrays himself in a purgatory of his own making because he feels caught between memories of the past, the emotional upheaval of the present, and an imagined future state that remains uncertain 'secret and unknown', leaving the speaker spiritually neither here nor 'there'[93]: 'Below the earth, above the skies'.

Rossetti leaves his speaker at the precipice of Heaven and Hell, replicating through his speaker's life in grief the sweet agony of awaiting reunion with the beloved in the Earthly Paradise. The speaker's memory of painting the portrait visually reproduces Dante's meeting Beatrice in the Earthly Paradise, evoking again *The Meeting* (fig.10):

[91] 'The Portrait', *CW*, ll.10-18, p.185.
[92] 'Dante at Verona', *CW*, ll.353, p.214.
[93] 'The Portrait', *CW*, l.28, p.185.

In painting her I shrined her face
  Mid mystic trees, where light falls in
Hardly at all; a covert place
  Where you might think to find a din
Of doubtful talk, and a live flame
Wandering, and many a shape whose name
  Not itself knoweth, and old dew,
  And your own footsteps meeting you,
And all things going as they came.[94]

The speaker recollects rendering the beloved as 'a live flame […] whose name not itself knoweth' harking back to Dante's descriptions of Beatrice clothed in the 'color of living flame'[95] and so humble that she is unaware of the profound meaning she holds for the pilgrim; because 'even she who was called Beatrice by many […] knew not wherefore'.[96] The beloved radiates divine light, holding the key to blessing within herself and enveloped in foliage so dense it blocks out all light – situated 'Mid mystic trees' in a 'deep dim wood'[97] – reminiscent of 'the divine forest, thick and alive'[98] lying 'dark under the perpetual shade'.[99] Moreover, the speaker senses 'all above/ And all around was fragrant air'[100] recalling the 'ground that breathed/ fragrance from every side' [su per lo suol che d'ogne]. [101] Both Dante and Rossetti enclose the beloved in the natural splendour and abundance of the Garden of Eden, endowing her physical figure with sacred significance (the eternal return of all souls back to their origin: 'all things going as they came') and emerging as 'the living Light'[102] ['nel vivo lume'] or the spiritually sustaining nectar at the heart of the celestial Rose. Hence, Rossetti grants the beloved revelatory powers because she foreshadows a mystical encounter in which the 'soul' is reconciled to God: 'And your own footsteps meeting

[94] 'The Portrait', *CW*, ll.18-26, (p.185).
[95] *Purgatorio*. 30.33, pp.512-3.
[96] *NL*, pp.22-4.
[97] 'The Portrait', *CW*, l.28, p.185.
[98] *Purgatorio*, 28.2, p.475.
[99] *Purgatorio*, 28.10-2, p.475.
[100] 'The Portrait', *CW*, l.64-5, p.186.
[101] *Purgatorio*, 28.6, pp.474-5.
[102] *Paradiso*, 33.110, pp.666-7.

you', reminiscent of Galatians 5.25: 'If we live in the spirit, let us also walk in the spirit' as well as Jeremiah 10.23: 'O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps'.[103]

In painting the beloved, the speaker experiences their identities fusing together, breaking down the boundaries of the self that the pronouns 'I' and 'she' originally set up. It is the poetical process that allows the speaker to immortalize the beloved: he remembers: 'the still movement of her hands/ And such the pure line's gracious flow' highlighting the artist's ability to give sentience to what is now lost, preserving the vibrant dynamism of her body, so that even after she has been made 'still' by death her image is imbued with 'movement' momentarily rendering him unable to distinguish between appearance and reality: 'Unknown the presence and the dream'[104].

Rossetti demonstrates how his speakers penitential remembering and reinvention leads to reunion with the beloved and God – the fulfilment of the beloved's prophetic vision:

> Even so, where Heaven holds breath and hears
> The beating heart of Love's own breast, –
> Where round the secret of all spheres
> All angels lay their wings to rest, –
> How shall my soul stand rapt and awed,
> When, by the new birth borne abroad
> Throughout the music of the suns,
> It enters in her soul at once
> And knows the silence there for God![105]

Rossetti suggests that having been purged of the 'burthen'[106] of his memories ('For now doth daylight disavow/ Those days'[107]) the speaker is now able to imagine ascending to the heights of Dante's Empyrean and share in mystical communion with God, anticipating the pilgrim's beatific vision at the end of *Paradiso*:

> O eternal Light, who throne only within yourself,
> solely know yourself, and known by yourself
> and knowing, love and smile:
> that circulation which seemed in you to be
> generated by reflected light surveyed by my
> eyes somewhat,
> within itself, in its very own color, seemed to

[103] For biblical metaphors of walking in the footsteps of Christ, see also Jeremiah 10.23, Psalms 17.5 and 37.23.
[104]The Portrait, *CW*, l.33, p.70.
[105]'The Portrait', *CW*, ll.91-99, p.187.
[106] 'The Portrait', *CW*, l.66, p.186.
[107] 'The Portrait', *CW*, ll.74-5, p.186.

me to be painted with our effigy by which my
sight was all absorbed
[…]

But my own feathers were not sufficient for
that, except that my mind was struck by a flash in
which its desire came.
Here my high imagining failed of power; but
Already my desire and the *velle* were turned, like
a wheel being moved evenly,
by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.[108]

[O luce etterna che solo in te sidi,
sola t'intendi, e da te intelleta,
e intendente te ami e arridi
Quella circulazion che sì concetta
pareva in te come lume reflesso,
da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,
dentro da sé, dal suo colore stesso
mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.
[…]
Ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne,
se non che la mia mente fu percossa
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa,
ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l *velle*,
sì come rota ch' igualmente è mossa,
l'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.]

Thus, Rossetti heralds the beloved as an icon for spiritual and emotional catharsis that frees the lover from his state of temporal suspension, anticipation and bittersweet memory, in this life, by offering him an artistic vision of their reunion in the Earthly Paradise and the prospect of the ultimate mystical completion in which 'my soul' enters 'her soul' and 'knows the silence there for God'.

In doing so, Rossetti displays an eternal return to Dante, the source of all his artistic inspiration, specifically here by using the pilgrim's journey to Beatrice in Eden as an analogy not only for the lover's desire for transcendence of the body in the beloved, but in the context of the artist a desire for transcendence of mortality in the artwork. Like Canto XXX, Rossetti's poem develops the presentation of the beloved from an

[108] *Paradiso*, 33.124-145, pp.666-7.

erotic spectacle into a vision of spiritual reunion with the beloved as prefiguring mystical union with the divine.

In Canto XXX, Dante seeks to mitigate the erotic overtones of Beatrice's arrival, by staging the reunion between lovers as a reconciliation between Christ and the human soul and deploying Beatrice as the pilgrim's ultimate judge and spiritual guide. Far from receiving the approval and 'gladness' of Beatrice's eyes, she rebukes the pilgrim: 'Look at us well! Truly I am, truly I am/ Beatrice. How have you deigned to approach the mountain? Did you not know that here mankind is/ happy?' ['Guardami ben! Ben son, ben son Beatrice/ come degnasti d'accedere al monte?/ mon sapei tu che qui è l'uom felice?']. [109] Her command to 'Look' seems almost derisive, given her extensive concealment, yet it points to a crucial change in the pilgrim's outlook as his sight will have to be re-orientated and he will have to look deeper in order to understand not only himself, the cosmos, divine design and his beloved. He will have to see Beatrice without eyes first in her role as 'Minerva' (Wisdom personified) and the ultimate judge. As one of the great modern commentators on Dante, Domenico De Robertis points out, Beatrice echoes Isaiah 43.11 'I am, I am the Lord'.[110] This visually draws attention to the dual nature of Christ as divine and mortal but also Beatrice's double role as both beloved and divine interlocutor. Moreover, Beatrice questions the pilgrim's – also in a sense the reader's – presumption to advance to the Earthly Paradise before he has felt contrition and actively confessed.

Dante suggests that the pilgrim's vision must be redirected before he can follow Beatrice as his spiritual guide, through the ritual of contrition, before he can see 'truly'. The pilgrim must approach her and the reminder of the journey with an open and contrite heart rather than a heart '[a]flame'.[111]

Beatrice demonstrates how in life she directed the pilgrim's moral sight, recalling: 'I sustained him with my/ countenance: showing him my youthful eyes, I led/ him with me turned in the right direction'[112] ['Alcun tempo il sostenni col mio volto:/ mostrando li occhi giovanetti a lui,/ meco il menava in dritta parte vòlto'] implying that the

[109] *Purgatorio*, 30.73-75, pp.514-5.
[110] *Purgatorio*, 30.n.73, p.525 and Is. 43.11 and 25.
[111] *Purgatorio*, 30.48, p.518.
[112] *Purgatorio*, 30.121-123, p.516-7.

pilgrim's movement to 'a way not true'[113] ['via non vera'] must now be corrected before he can experience her 'countenance' as it will be in the life to come. Beatrice's censure and denial manifests itself as a kind of contrapasso because the pilgrim, having turned his back on Beatrice's spiritual guidance after her death, must now suffer being denied the sight of her 'hidden power'[114] ['occulta virtù'], suggesting that punishment for his waywardness is a denial of spiritual guidance. The pilgrim must feel the burden of his sins upon himself and cannot defer to another, who omnisciently anticipates his guilt and confession.

At Beatrice's urging, the pilgrim confesses to the charges she lays against him, observing: 'Confusion and fear mixed together drove such a/ "Yes" out of my mouth that to hear it one needed/ eyes' ['Confusione e paura insieme miste/ mi pinsero un tal "sì" fuor de la bocca/ al quale intender fuor mestier le viste'].[115] He senses himself losing all sense of direction and stability, unable to clearly discern the pattern of his own emotions that were 'mixed together' so startled and disordered that he is rendered mute, his confirmation only perceptible visually.

Dante externalizes the pilgrim's burden in his physical posture because he remains humbled with eyes downcast. That is, until Beatrice has exacted his confession, presented a case against the pilgrim and delivered her moral instruction, only directing him to lift his eyes in order to augment his sense of shame and guilt, she declares : 'If you are pained by listening, lift up your beard, and you will have more pain gazing' ['Quando/ per udir se' dolente, alza la barba,/ e prenderai più doglia riguardando.']. [116] It is only after admitting his guilt that he is allowed to look upon Beatrice and is relieved, physically, from his burden, able to see that one of the veils surrounding her has been lifted because the angels have 'ceased their scattering of flowers' ['da loro aspersion 1'occhio comprese;'].[117] Yet as Beatrice points out, her gradual unveiling will bring him further anguish, he sees:

> Under her veil and beyond the river she seemed
> to me to surpass her former self more than she
> surpassed other women here, when she was here.

[113] *Purgatorio*, 30.130, p.516-7.
[114] *Purgatorio*, 30.38, pp.512-3.
[115] *Purgatorio*, 31.13-5, pp.530-1.
[116] *Purgatorio*, 31.67-69, pp.532-3.
[117] *Purgatorio*, 31,77-8, pp.534-5.

The nettle of repentance so pricked me then,
that whatever other thing has most turned me
toward its love, now became most hateful to me.
So much recognition bit my heart that I fell
overcome, and what I then became, she knows
who was the cause[118]

[Sotto '1 suo velo e oltre la rivera
vincer pariemi piu se stessa antica,
vincer che Paltre qui, quand' ella c'era.
Di penter si mi punse ivi 1'ortica
che di tutte altre cose qual mi torse
piu nel suo amor, piu mi si fe nemica.
Tanta riconoscenza il cor mi morse
ch'io caddi vinto, e quale allora femmi
salsi colei che la cagion mi porse.]

The pilgrim's view of Beatrice causes him to be overwhelmed by not just a sense of remorse but of 'recognition' that is he appreciates and feels the gravity of his responsibility for his own moral failings. Yet, while the pilgrim undergoes spiritual improvement, Dante evokes an undercurrent of ecstatic desire in his vision of Beatrice: his repetition of 'surpass' suggests that Beatrice as he sees her now exceeds any sight on heaven or earth, even transcending the pilgrim's memory. Through his almost orgasmic fainting at the sight of Beatrice Dante associates the pilgrim's feelings with forbidden desire as exemplified by Francesca da Rimini in *Inferno*. The pilgrim feels himself 'overcome', taken over, indicating a loss of personal agency at the very moment he feels moral accountability, which echoes Francesca's deferral of responsibility: 'one point alone was the point that overpowered us' ['ma solo un punto fu quell che ci vinse']. [119] He also enacts Paolo and Francesca's physical responses to each other, they are 'all trembling'[120] ['tutto tremante'], which the pilgrim replicates in Beatrice's presence. [121] Moreover, the pilgrim hints at self-transformation (possibly the self-transforming power of contrition and confession) yet seems uncertain as to what this entails. His knowledge, like his view, is restricted and consigned to another ('she knows who was the cause') one who has a greater perspective than himself, one with a godlike power of insight.

[118] *Purgatorio*, 31.82-90, pp.534-5.
[119] *Inferno*, 5.131-2, pp.92-3.
[120] *Inferno*, 5.136, pp.92-3.
[121] *Purgatorio*, 30.36 and 47, pp.512-3.

Rossetti displays the beloved as the sole source of awe, moral insight and divine judgement for his speaker in 'Soul's Beauty' (1866):

> Under the arch of Life, where love and death,
> Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw
> Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe,
> I drew it in as simply as my breath.
> Hers are the eyes which, over and beneath,
> The sky and sea bend on thee,—which can draw,
> By sea or sky or woman, to one law,
> The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath.[122]

Like Dante's pilgrim, the speaker discovers his beloved at the intersection between love and death; Heaven and Hell. It is here that he sees her 'enthroned' casting a look towards him that should strike 'awe', a reverential admixture of fear and wonder, yet ultimately revives him becoming the very air he 'breath[es]'. Rossetti heightens the sense that it is only by the beloved's inspection and decree, depicted as an omniscient and omnipotent kind of double vision guarding access 'over and beneath' to the gates of the afterlife, that he can receive his 'allotted' reward or punishment from the supreme 'one law' that governs the universe. This he prefigures as either 'her palm', her hand or the palm leaf (proclaiming Jesus' entry to Jerusalem) or wreath (flowers for the spiritually damned). For Rossetti, it is not the beloved's look that the speaker fears but her divine judgement, which for the pilgrim is a source of 'trembling' because she makes his 'hand and voice shake still'[123], though this is not enough to stop him following her 'passionately and irretrievably' in 'fond flight'[124] beyond the grave.

Furthermore, the speaker of 'Equal Troth' is made to recognise his inferiority before his divinely-sanctioned beloved:

> Not by one measure mayst thou mete our love;
> For how should I be loved as I love thee?—
> I, graceless, joyless, lacking absolutely
> All gifts that with thy queenship best behove;—
> Thou, throned in every heart's elect alcove,
> And crowned with garlands culled from every tree,
> Which for no head but thine, by Love's decree,
> All beauties and all mysteries interwove.
>
> But here thine eyes and lips yield soft rebuke:—

[122] 'Soul's Beauty', *CW*, ll.1-8, p.314.
[123] 'Soul's Beauty', *CW*, l.10, p.314.
[124] 'Soul's Beauty', *CW*, ll.13-14, p.314.

"Then only," (say'st thou) "could I love thee less,
When thou couldst doubt my love's equality."
Peace, sweet! If not to sum but worth we look,—
Thy heart's transcendence, not my heart's excess,—
Then more a thousandfold thou lov'st than I.[125]

The speaker imagines his beloved as the supreme antithesis of his frail humanity, full of the 'grace', 'joy' and possessing 'absolutely/All gifts' of her 'queenship' which has been authorized by 'Love's decree'. It is from the abundance of all creation, 'every heart's' deepest longings and 'every tree', that she is 'crowned' (as the symbolic centre of the circle, restorer of divine order) as the Edenic centrepiece of all 'beauties and mysteries'. However, the speaker momentarily questions her undying love, leading the beloved not only to speak (one of the rare instances in *The House of Life* the reader hears her speech directly) but to, in imitation of Beatrice, 'yield soft rebuke', suggesting he might only alienate himself from hers and God's affections if he were to fall into despair and 'doubt' her mutual love. Her intervention incites the speaker's resulting epiphany that it is only through the power of her love's 'transcendence', rather than an 'excess' of feeling, that moral conversion (through contrition and reparation) is possible.

For the pilgrim in *Purgatorio*, catching sight of Beatrice remains elusive. Dante maximizes the obstacles to the moment where the pilgrim and Beatrice's eyes will meet. He does this by sublimating and exposing the pilgrim's sensual responses to her through a series of religious rituals the climax of which result in a lifting of one of Beatrice's veils: contrition and confession signals the lifting of the 'cloud of flowers', baptism (Matelda's immersion of the pilgrim in the Lethe) results in his brief glimpse of her 'holy smile'[126] ['santo riso'] and his witnessing of a celestial pageant (culminating in the pilgrim's first direct vision of Beatrice, now transformed, 'under new leaves' and his first reciprocated gaze).

Even when the pilgrim is permitted to look towards Beatrice she has her face (still veiled) turned away from him, focused solely on divine contemplation, on the Gryphon. Having attained the right to see Beatrice, albeit indirectly, Dante suggests

[125] 'Equal Troth', *CW*, ll.1-14, p.292.
[126] *Purgatorio*, 32.5, pp.548-9.

the pilgrim's desire to see (and know more) has not been cooled rather heightened, he feels:

> A thousand desires hotter than flame drew my
> eyes to her shining ones, which were still fixed
> unmoving on the gryphon.
> Like the sun in a mirror, not otherwise shone
> there the double beast, now with one bearing, now
> with another.
> Think, reader, if I marveled when I saw that the
> thing in itself remained unchanged, but in its
> eidolon transmuted itself!
> While, full of awe and joyful, my soul tasted that
> food which, by satisfying, makes one thirst for it[127]
>
> [Mille disiri piu che fiamma caldi
> strinsermi li occhi a li occhi rilucenti,
> che pur sopra '1 grifone stavan saldi.
> Come in lo specchio il sol, non altrimenti
> la doppia fiera dentro vi raggiava or con altri,
> or con altri reggimenti.
> Pensa, letter, s'io mi maravigliava
> quando vedea la cosa in se star queta,
> e ne Pidolo suo si trasmutava!
> Mentre che piena di stupore e lieta
> 1'anima mia gustava di quel cibo che,
> saziando di se, di se asseta,]

Dante uses the pilgrim's gaze into the beloved's eyes in two ways: firstly to reveal the potential for erotic objectification implicit in the very act of looking (he demonstrates the spectre of this hanging over the entire first encounter with Beatrice) leading to temptation and fall from grace (he literally faints) but secondly as a route to seeing the truth. The pilgrim can only glean Christ's dual divine and mortal nature through the medium of Beatrice's eyes, which 'mirror', contain within them and reconcile this theological paradox – the pilgrim sees this image as though it is continually shifting 'now with one bearing, now with another' and he is adamant he sees 'the thing in itself remained unchanged'. He depicts both Beatrice's eyes and the Gryphon as 'shining' and 'shone' they are ineffable sources of 'eternal, living light'[128] and divine beauty, insinuating that the truth is inexpressible but also held within the circles of Beatrice's eyes. Moreover, his desire to look into Beatrice eyes – already intense as 'A thousand desires hotter than flame' – is amplified by seeing such divine resolution and rendered

[127] *Purgatorio*, 31.118-28, pp.536-7.
[128] *Purgatorio*, 31.139, pp.536-7.

insatiable: ‘my soul tasted that food which, by satisfying, makes one thirst for it’. Dante depicts the way in which sensual desire can be inextricably linked to spiritual desire, tempering but also magnifying it, and he does this through the medium of the eyes – it is Beatrice the pilgrim desires to see but it is the spiritual insight she holds that he ‘thirst[’s] for’.[129]

Dante employs the three theological virtues Faith, Hope and Love (as personified ladies) to emphasize both to the pilgrim and reader that Beatrice has not yet returned the pilgrim’s gaze, they implore her:

> “Turn, Beatrice, turn your holy eyes […]
> to your faithful one who has come so far to see you!
> For grace, do us the grace of unveiling your
> mouth to him, so that he might discern the second
> beauty that you conceal”[130]
>
> [“Volgi, Beatrice, volgi li occhi santi,
> […] al tuo fedele,
> che per vederti ha mossi passi tanti!
> Per grazia, fa noi grazia che disvele
> a lui la bocca tua, si che discerna
> la seconda bellezza che tu cele."]

Dante’s repetition of ‘turn’ and ‘grace’ imply that for Beatrice to cast her gaze (focused on contemplating the divine) elsewhere it must occur in the name of ‘grace’ rather than desire. Thus, her partial unveiling becomes divinely sanctioned. Dante uses the virtues to introduce a further impediment to the meeting of their eyes, the unveiling of Beatrice’s ‘mouth’ in place of her eyes, seemingly overlooking the erotic connotations involved in this act but also the fact that his own characters are involved in savouring and displaying the physicality of Beatrice, building her up and breaking her down to a set of ‘eyes’ and ‘mouth’, playing with her features.

Dante prolongs the moment their eyes will meet even further, making the reader hyper-aware of its arrival, but also creates an elaborate, teasing spectacle, which the reader is prescribed to anticipate and engage with. Moreover, there is a sense that he sets

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[129] In a reversal of such enduring spiritual desire, Christina Rossetti demonstrates how the allurements of the world prove toxic and ‘cankerous’ in the sexual economy of her ‘Goblin Market’, threatening Laura with physical and spiritual starvation without the external assistance of her sister, Lizzie, who like Beatrice enacts a kind of Christ-like salvific agency. See Christina Rossetti, *Poems and Prose*, p.105-119.
[130] *Purgatorio*, 31.133-15, pp.536-7.

Beatrice up as a spectacle for our viewing pleasure: each unveiling heightens the pilgrim's desire to see 'more deeply'[131] ['piu profondo'] she is the medium through which we glimpse the Gryphon and she will take centre stage in the celestial pageant. So not only does the reader participate in the spectacle Dante creates of Beatrice but she also seems to partake in his vision of her.

Dante does disrupt the moment of unveiling of Beatrice's smile, by having the virtues reprimand the pilgrim, who experiences: 'those goddesses forcibly turned my/ face to the left, for I heard from them a "Too/ fixedly!"' ['per forza mi fu volto il viso/ ver' la sinistra mia da quelle dee,/ perch' io udi' da loro un "Troppo fiso!"'].[132] This admonishment is particularly peculiar from those who begged so fervently for the pilgrim's access to her 'holy smile', almost like an afterthought on the part of the poet. It may seek to keep the pilgrim's desire to 'slake his ten-year thirst' under control, directing and moderating his vision of Beatrice, yet this concern seems to arrive too late as he has already surrendered himself to the vision, feeling: 'that all [his] other senses were extinguished' ['che li altri sensi m'eran tutti spenti'].[133] The pilgrim experiences the obliteration of almost all sensation, pre-figuring the final obliteration of his sight subsumed by the blinding light of the Beatific Vision, so that all he sees is her and is left momentarily blinded by the sun-like rays of her smile. Hence, the reader is made to feel the artificiality of the barriers Dante constructs between the pilgrim and Beatrice, set up to divert attention to the poem's religious rather than personal narrative which Dante exposes as a false dualism – the route to God is not in spite of but through Beatrice. A realisation Rossetti, again, depicts in his sonnet 'The Kiss' in which his speaker locates his primal immortality and desire to unify with God in his beloved's eyes, feeling himself become 'A spirit when her spirit looked through me […] Fire within fire, desire in deity'.[134] I will examine this sonnet in relation to Bernard of Clairvaux's mystical writings in greater detail in the following chapter.

It is Beatrice who insists the pilgrim keep his gaze directed towards the celestial pageant (spectacularly depicting a host of allusions to Christ's life: Incarnation, Baptism, Transfiguration, Crucifixion, Ascension), so that even as she becomes its

[131] *Purgatorio,* 31.111, pp.536-7.
[132] *Purgatorio*, 32.9, pp.548-9.
[133] *Purgatorio*, 32.3, pp.548-9.
[134] 'The Kiss', *CW*, ll.11-14, p.278.

focus she instructs him: 'keep your eyes now on the chariot, and what you see, returning back there make sure you write'. Beatrice is able to temper not only the pilgrim's vision but his verse directing him to witness and spread the word about these apocalyptic sights (exposing the corruption of the Church over the course of history and in particular the papacy) because he is her spiritual devotee, observing: 'Thus Beatrice; and I, all devoted to the very/ foot of her commandments, turned my mind/ and eyes were she willed' ['Così Beatrice; e io, che tutto ai piedi/ d'i suoi comandamenti era divoto,/ la mente e li occhi ov' ella voile diedi.'].[135]

Dante understates the moment Beatrice returns the pilgrim's gaze, saturating the reader's senses with a grand and intricate celestial pageant designed to distract from this very deliberate delay. After so much build up, her long-awaited reciprocity seems almost casual, the pilgrim observes: 'She walked along, and I do not believe she had taken her tenth step upon the earth, when with her eyes she dazzled mine' ['Così sen giva, e non credo che fosse/ lo decimo suo passo in terra posto,/ quando con li occhi li occhi mi percosse,'].[136] Dante abridges the pilgrim's 'ten-year thirst', reproduced and stretched out over three cantos, to ten 'step[s] upon the earth'. This suggests that through the redirection or alteration of the pilgrim's outlook, his interpretative filter, the horizons of his sight (though as Beatrice notes remains 'untutored'[137] ['rude'] unprepared for comprehending God's designs) have been widened, because he is able to meet her gaze directly without loss of consciousness, personal agency or sensory perception. Yet, Beatrice will continue to 'dazzle'[138] ['t'abbaglia'] the pilgrim, a spiritual and sensual spectacle that will never 'satiate' ['sazio'] him. [139]

As Dante does in Canto XXX Rossetti demonstrates the artificiality of the barriers he sets up between his speaker and the beloved. In 'Hope Overtaken'(1871) Rossetti expresses, through linguistic equivalence, how his speaker's vision is eclipsed by a single constant spectacle – a vision of the beloved as Beatrice unveiled:

> O Hope of mine whose eyes are living love,
> No eyes but hers,—O Love and Hope the same!—
> Lean close to me, for now the sinking sun

[135] *Purgatorio*, 32.106-8, pp.554-5.
[136] *Purgatorio*, 33.16-8, pp.566-7.
[137] *Purgatorio*, 33.101, pp.570-1.
[138] *Purgatorio*, 33.75, pp.570-1.
[139] *Purgatorio*, 33.138, pp.572-3.

That warmed our feet scarce gilds our hair above.
O hers thy voice and hers thy name!
Alas, cling round me, for the day is done! [140]

Rossetti suggests that the beloved holds both erotic potential in her physical eyes, full of love, and moral insight because they channel the 'eternal, living light'[141] of Beatrice, whose revelatory message of 'Hope', 'Love' and faith is implicit in the lover's plea for the beloved to 'Lean close to me' – causes him to cry out for 'God!'.[142] Moreover, it renders the sensual love of the beloved as indistinguishable from divine love represented by the theological virtues, Beatrice and God, 'the living Light'[143] of the pilgrim's Beatific Vision: 'O hers thy voice and hers thy name!'. Rossetti conveys how sensual desire for physical proximity with the beloved comes from the speaker's original, Edenic desire to be reconciled to the dual mortal and divine love of Beatrice as Christ. The beloved, like Beatrice, represents the transcendental force of 'love' that moves all creation 'all things that are'[144] and causes their return to God 'all things going as they came'.[145]

However, Rossetti implies that even when the speaker is consoled by his beloved's physical presence, obtaining mutual affection does not quench his desire because, as his repeated calls for her to 'cling round me' suggest, there remains a niggling uncertainty that the beloved will arrive in time to save him from the 'sinking sun' (spiritual obscurity). By delaying satisfaction, Rossetti amplifies his speaker's Edenic (sexual-spiritual) desire to be encompassed in the beloved's divine embrace and suggests that even when 'the day is done' he will continue to insatiably look for 'No eyes but hers'.

Rossetti's offers the reader brief ecstatic visions of the afterlife but avoids certainty so that the 'the longing for accomplishment of individual desire after death'[146] is always kindled but its accomplishment is, like Dante's unveiling of Beatrice, agonisingly slow to arrive. His last sonnet of *The House of Life* 'The One Hope' (1881) provides

[140] 'Hope Overtaken', *CW*, ll.9-14, p.297
[141] *Purgatorio*, 31.139, p.537.
[142] 'Hope Overtaken', l.5, (p.297).
[143] *Paradiso*, 33.110, p.667.
[144] 'Gracious Moonlight', *CW*, l.7 p.286.
[145] 'The Portrait', *CW*, l.26, (p.185).
[146] *LDGR*, II, p.821.

perhaps the most sustained vision of the speaker's journey through the Earthly Paradise to his beloved:

> When vain desire at last and vain regret
> Go hand in hand to death, and all is vain,
> What shall assuage the unforgotten pain
> And teach the unforgetful to forget?
> Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet,—
> Or may the soul at once in a green plain
> Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain
> And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet?
>
> Ah! when the wan soul in that golden air
> Between the scriptured petals softly blown
> Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown,—
> Ah! let none other alien spell soe'er
> But only the one Hope's one name be there,—
> Not less nor more, but even that word alone.[147]

At the point of death (and spiritual rebirth) Rossetti's speaker surrenders his fleshly body, ridding himself of all desire and regret and anticipates meeting his beloved in an Edenic landscape, complete with 'a sunk stream', or the river Lethe, whose very purpose in *Purgatorio* is to 'teach the unforgetful to forget', verdant 'plain[s]', ritual baptism (making the speaker humble himself by 'Stoop[ing]' through the purifying 'spray of some sweet life fountain' and celestial bouquets. It is not the oblivion of self-annihilation that the speaker craves but his original desire to be returned, at the end of 'all', to the 'gift of grace' and to the 'one Hope's one name'. Rossetti may leave this 'name' unsaid yet it recalls that 'shape whose name/ Not itself knoweth'[148] that very same Beatrice we meet in Dante's Earthly Paradise (whose 'eyes' are 'Hope' itself and whose 'name' reflects the 'living love' of God) and that 'mystical lady'[149] of *Hand and Soul* (1850) who Rossetti's speaker's cannot help but see everywhere.

Conclusion

Rossetti and Dante use their portrayals of their characters to explore the gaze (the image of the eye or circle and its centre), which operate on a micro and macroscopic level, describing the dynamics of looking (the relationship between the observer and

[147] 'The One Hope', *CW*, ll.1-14, p.325.
[148] 'The Portrait', *CW*, ll.23-4, p.185.
[149] 'Hand and Soul', *CW*, p.50.

the observed) a physical manifestation of personal identity but also depicting the dynamic between the lover and his beloved, the individual human soul and God and all of creation with its Creator. The look embodies an understanding or interpretation of the world, or world-view, demonstrating what is psychological and elusive yet defined through the bodily sensation of seeing.

Dante employs his characters to fix and avert their gaze by impairing the physical sight they use to gaze in order to highlight the difficulty of trying to uphold a human, individual gaze in this life (in via) and in the life to come (in patria). In doing so, he presents the gaze as paradoxical, by oscillating between the unseen and invisible and what is seen and visible whilst highlighting an attraction towards that 'eternal Light' in which 'sight was all absorbed'.[150]

Rossetti appropriates a complex set of imagery from Dante's Ante Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise including a preoccupation with looking (equation of the eyes of the beloved with leading lights, or the heavenly spheres), threshold experiences (constructing and collapsing of boundaries between the self and the Other, Heaven and Earth and the mortal and divine and locating perfection at the intersection, meeting point between poetry and painting, spirit and flesh the persistence of memory and imagery of the Eden (signalling a return to origins). In doing so, Rossetti rearticulates the loss and recovery of Dante's Beatrice as the lover's loss and regaining of self-identity, self-worth but also hope of fulfilment – sexual satisfaction, psychological harmony, spiritual consolation or redemption and a glimpse of God – which he locates in his beloved. Thus, Rossetti faithfully renders not only the topography of Dante's *Commedia* but the minutiae of its circular imagery, which treats Beatrice's eyes as a beacon drawing pilgrim out of Hell through Purgatory and Paradise and prefigures his face to face meeting with God at the close of *Paradiso*. As Rossetti sums up in his description of Dante's composition of the Commedia in 'Dante at Verona':

> Each hour, as then the Vision pass'd,
> He heard the utter harmony
> Of the nine trembling spheres, till she
> Bowed her eyes towards him in the last,
> So that all ended with her eyes,
> Hell, Purgatory, Paradise. [151]

[150] *Paradiso*, 33.132, p.667.
[151] 'Dante at Verona', ll.415-420, p.216.

Chapter Three.

Mirroring Desire: The prism of Paradisal Delights.

She loves him; for her infinite soul is Love,
  And he her lodestar. Passion in her is
  A glass facing his fire, where the bright bliss
Is mirrored, and the heat returned. Yet move
That glass, a stranger's amorous flame to prove,
  And it shall turn, by instant contraries,
  Ice to the moon; while her pure fire to his
For whom it burns, clings close i' the heart's alcove.

Lo! they are one. With wifely breast to breast
  And circling arms, she welcomes all command
  Of love […]

– 'II. Her Love', ll.1-11, pp.303-4

Rossetti wrote a group of three sonnets entitled 'True Woman' in late 1880, two years before his death, and was so pleased with them he wrote to Hall Caine: 'I wish I had you by me to hear 3 sonnets with which I wind up Part I of the House of Life. They are called True Woman and are my best'.[1] Each sonnet associates the beloved with a Heaven of eternal love and light, which the speaker seeks to be enveloped in the 'wave bowered pearl'[2], the 'heart's alcove' and 'her soul's immediate sanctuary'.[3] In particular, 'II. Her Love' depicts the beloved's soul as infinitely deep moved by and capable of containing the power of Love itself – so that her desire takes the form of a mirror reflecting the 'bright bliss' and 'heat' of Love everlasting. Rossetti fuses this image with that of the lover and beloved returning each other's burning gazes, demonstrating the reciprocity of their desire, in order to knit the lover, beloved and Love itself together in a mystical marriage: 'With wifely breast to breast/ And circling arms, she welcomes all command/ Of love'. Rossetti presents Paradise, I will argue, as a sphere of prismatic light, desire and mystical union akin to the 'Paradisal Love'[4] of Dante's *Paradiso* in which all Heavenly bodies: blessed souls, angelic figures,

[1] Fredeman, VI, 80.384 p.332.
[2] 'I. Herself', *CW*, l.13, p.303
[3] 'III. Her Heaven', *CW*, l.7, p.304.
[4] 'On the "Vita Nuova" of Dante', *CW*, l.10, p.220.

Beatrice as Imparadised beloved, and God himself takes on the appearance of a succession of reflective surfaces – the latter being the truest reflector of all.

Important to this discussion is the mystical expression of Bernard of Clairvaux, who is the focus of the latter half of this chapter, and to a lesser extent Bonaventure. Both Bernard and Bonaventure appear as characters in Dante's *Paradiso*. References to their mystical writings are few outside the *Commedia* so the most telling evidence we have for Dante's high esteem for their work can be found in the exalted roles they occupy in *Paradiso*. Dante gives Bernard a major role in the final three cantos because it is Bernard, who unexpectedly replaces Beatrice as the pilgrim's guide through the highest Heaven (the Empyrean), and explains its wonders.[5] Bernard is also key in refocusing the pilgrim's attention to find a new object for his spiritual fervour – the Virgin Mary. In Canto XXXIII, Bernard prays to Mary, at the pilgrim's behest, asking for permission to advance to an unmediated vision of God.[6] Bonaventure's appearance in Canto XII, replicates the role he occupied historically as a conciliator between different orders within the Church. Dante employs Bonaventure, who was a Franciscan, to praise St. Dominic (patron of the Franciscans' rival order, the Dominicans) in order to present him as the champion for a temperate and spiritually pure version of Franciscanism.[7] It is the mystics in *Paradiso*, then, who show the pilgrim how to heal divisions within the Church, and within man's relationship with God – through love. Christian mysticism can, broadly speaking, be understood through the, fourteenth-century theologian Jean Gerson's, classic dictum: 'Mystical theology is an experiential knowledge of God that comes through the embrace of love' (*theologia mystica est cognitio experimentalis habita de Deo per amoris unitive*).[8]

This school of theology, mediated through the *Commedia*, helps us to recontextualize the way Rossetti's poetry articulates and conceptualizes divine encounters in erotic terms. i.e. as a sensual or sexual longing to embrace what is spiritual, bodiless and infinite. Implicit in Rossetti's rhetoric of desire is a kind of mirroring, or self-

[5] See *Paradiso*, 31.58-138, pp.622-627.
[6] Steven Botterill, 'Bernard, St.', in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard Lansing (London: Routledge, 2010), p.99.
[7] Botterill, 'Bonaventure, St.', *The Dante Encyclopedia*, p120-1.
[8] Jean Gersen, *Ioannis Carlerii de Gerson: De Mystica Theologia*, I.28.4-7 ed. by Andre Coombes (Lugano, Switzerland: Thesarus Mundi, 1958, p.72. As quoted in William Harmless, 'A Theology Called Mystical', *Mystics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.5.

reflection because mankind wants the attributes they do not possess, looking to define themselves against what they are not (the perfection represented by God) but also partake in this projected vision of God, trying to cling on to what is uncontainable and making sense of what is ineffable. As an imperfect replica of God's perfection, man occupies the liminal position of holding within themselves an indistinct fragment or share of what is unlimited, absolute and infinite. Concurrently, man has the capacity to find the key to perfection within themselves and yet is hampered by his fundamentally limited human condition. This inequality further destabilizes such an emotionally fraught relationship coloured by faith and doubt, possessiveness and abandonment, fervour and apathy that characterizes the lover's desire for the beloved, man's desire for man (and God) and the self's desire for the other.

Looked at this way, we can see that Rossetti manipulates all his speakers and subjects to construct and dismantle their 'mirror' images. These images which represent the limitations of human knowledge, sight and expression, offering a projected vision of the self, the other, their worldview and divine likeness, and he uses them in order to problematize the dynamics of desire, vision and representation and reveal the difficulty of sustaining such prismatic vision. Rossetti renders desire, vision and representation as paradoxical, oscillating between appearance and reality, and collapsing the distinctions between subject and object; lover, beloved and God; what is seen and unseen whilst highlighting an attraction towards the unimaginable. In doing so, as we shall see, Rossetti's works reflect the cosmological, epistemological and theological preoccupations of Dante's *Paradiso*, by replicating Dante's use of mirror imagery. In particular, Dante's portrayal of the structure of Paradise as a series of mirrored reflections, radiating God's love and light at its heart and his use of the image of the *speculum inferius*, or inferior mirror of man, (central to the philosophy of Bonaventure).[9] Moreover, we shall chart, in the latter half of this chapter, Rossetti's use of the double language of mysticism in Bernard of Clairvaux in order to depict the beloved and God as essentially mirrored, the source and goal of all desire, and engaged in a dynamic of mutual affection with the lover and human soul.

[9] James L. Miller, 'Three Mirrors of Dante's Paradiso', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 46.3, 1977, 267.

A paradise full of mirrors: Dante, Rossetti and Bonaventure's Inferior Mirror of Man

Rossetti and Dante use their portrayals of subjects and characters to envision Paradise as a series of mirrors. In Dante's *Paradiso*, mirror imagery functions on a micro- and macroscopic level, so that all heavenly bodies: the blessed souls, angels and heavenly spheres become translucent mediums for the transmission of divine light with the supra-structure of the Empyrean taking the form of an all-seeing eye with the Godhead at its centre.

I am indebted to the work of James L. Miller on Dante's representation of mirrors, and I will extend his argument to reveal how Rossetti's appropriates Dante's theological and aesthetic schema. There are, as we will shall see, three theological metaphors key to Dante's use of mirror imagery, derived from Bonaventure's theology: the *speculum inferius*, or inferior mirror of man (a tarnished mirror, symbolizing the imperfection of human reason), *speculum est Dei Filius* or Christ's mirror (reflecting the wisdom of God), and the *speculum superius* or superior mirror of God (God as pristine mirror, representing his eternal vision). Dante sets up this hierarchy of mirrors, I argue, to describe the progress of the pilgrim's vision, seeing through his own eyes, then Beatrice's and finally looking into the face of God – where all hierarchical vision is obliterated.

Dante establishes the cosmic model of Paradise as series of mirrors or reflective surfaces: translucent souls, heavenly spheres as mirrors, and God as mirror. In the sphere of the moon, the pilgrim experiences his first encounter with the inhabitants of heaven as what seems to be a pale reflection:

> As through clear and polished glass, or else
> through waters pure and tranquil and not so
> deep that their bottom is hidden,
> the tracing of our faces return so weakly that
> a pearl on a white forehead is no fainter to our
> sight:
> so I saw many faces eager to speak, and I fell
> into the error contrary to the one that kindled
> love between the man and the fountain.
> As soon as I perceived them, thinking them to

be mirrored images, I turned my eyes to see
whose they might be,
  and, seeing nothing, I looked ahead again,
straight into the eyes of my sweet guide, who
smiled with holy ardor in her eyes.[10]

[Quali per vetri trasparenti e tersi
o ver per acque nitide e tranquille,
non sì profonde che i fondi sien persi,
  tornan d'i nostri visi le postille
debili sì che perla in bianca fronte
non vien men forte a le nostre pupille:
  tali vid' io più facce a parlar pronte,
per ch' io dentro a l'error contrario corsi
a quel ch' accese amor tra l'omo e 'l fonte.
  Sùbito sì com' io di lor m'accorsi,
quelle stimando specchiati sembianti,
per veder di cui fosser li occhi torsi;
  e nulla vidi, e ritorsili avanti
dritti nel lume de la dolce guida,
che sorridendo ardea ne li occhi santi.]

Dante shows how in the very act of looking at these souls the pilgrim turns them into 'mirrored images' because he immediately apprehends them as though they have been reflected through glass, shallow water or through the faint glimmer of a lady's 'pearl'. The pilgrim's error is one of earthly expectation – he still associates the diaphanous nature of the souls in heaven with how optical reflection operates on earth. This causes him to look for the source of what he believes is their reflection, and to turn away from seeing the souls as they truly are. Dante thus inverts the conclusion of the myth of Narcissus, who through a lack of self-knowledge mistakes his own eyes for a pair of stars (subsuming divine love into self-love). The effect of this is to depict the way in which the pilgrim's limited human vision leads him to look away from heavenly bodies (or Truth) altogether and towards his experiential or worldly knowledge, which leads not to a false projection or self-absorption (as with Narcissus) but to complete meaninglessness and oblivion.

Yet, Dante presents the pilgrim's reaction of 'seeing nothing' as paradoxical, because it does not deliver an absence of sight (or speech) but instead expresses a denial of visual meaning through seeing, visualising the invisible – his nothing becomes

[10] *Paradiso*, 3.10-24, pp.66-7

something. The pilgrim realizes the baselessness or groundlessness of his own worldview, which (as Beatrice points out) lacks any substance. Dante visually starts from zero – a movement signalled by his use of orbs or heavenly bodies in this canto: he associates Beatrice with the divine and illuminating power of 'sun', the natural reflectivity of 'white pearl', and null or 'nulla' typically depicted as O. It is only when the pilgrim turns his gaze back to Beatrice's eyes, newly invigorated by the 'holy ardor'[11] ['l'Ardor santo'] he finds there, that his sight and insight are restored and he is finally able to discern what is 'true'. Thus, Dante sustains the imagery of, the circle and its centre, and the beloved's revelatory eyes throughout the *Commedia* – anticipated most closely in *Purgatorio* and amplified in *Paradiso* to take on the governing structure of Heaven.

Beatrice has taught the pilgrim 'the formal principle'[12] ['formal principio'] of optics that governs the heavenly spheres: that how brightly souls, angels or heavenly bodies reflect the divine light of God depends on their 'different power'[13] ['diversa lege'], a varying capacity for good, which gives 'what seems different from light to light' ['cio che da luce a luce par differente'].[14] Dante visually demonstrates how easily the pilgrim falls back into old habits and (by now) obsolete ways of thinking (i.e. his reliance on perception) in order to dramatize the difficulty – for both the pilgrim and the reader – of unlearning the modes of thought that we depend upon in our ordinary lives.

Dante suggests that in Paradise a new kind of vision is required, capable of grappling with the eternal, of which Beatrice is emblematic: in *Purgatorio* Beatrice's mirror-like eyes gleam like 'emeralds' reflecting a view of the Gryphon (dual mortal-divine nature of Christ) whose meditation is the purpose of the journey. Beatrice embodies *speculum est Dei Filius* or Christ's mirror, literally reflecting his image within her vision. Her eyes function as portals through which the pilgrim ascends to the next sphere of heaven so that not only are the heavens held in her gaze but the pilgrim sees through her eyes. Furthermore, Beatrice corrects the pilgrim's filter of interpretation or inferior mirror of man, so that when the pilgrim's capacity to see and understand

[11] *Paradiso*, 7.74, pp.152-3.
[12] *Paradiso*, 2.146, pp.50-1
[13] *Paradiso*, 2.139, pp.50-1
[14] *Paradiso*, 2.145-6, pp.50-1

has been stretched to its limits, Dante portrays him as almost always returning to the eyes of his beloved:

> My sight, which followed [Piccarda] as long as
> possible, when it lost her turned to the target of
> greater desire,
> turned altogether to Beatrice; but she flashed
> so brightly in my gaze that at first my eyes could
> not endure it[15]
>
> [La vista mia, che tanto lei seguio
> quanto possibil fu, poi che la perse
> volsesi al segno di maggior
> disio, e a Beatrice tutta si converse;
> ma quella folgorò nel mio sguardo
> sì che da prima il viso non sofferse,]

Dante's separation of the clause 'My sight' ('La vista mia,' in the Italian) to the beginning of the sentence emphasizes how the pilgrim's whole field of vision becomes taken up by Beatrice, who is revealed as the basic 'desire' of his sight.

While in *Purgatorio* the pilgrim's desire to look into Beatrice's eyes was continually met with external and internal barriers (veils and his imperfect sight), however from this point in *Paradiso* Dante stresses that it is the pilgrim's own limitations that will encumber his view of Beatrice. This does not deter the pilgrim from looking, but stokes his desire to continue gazing, and expand his visual horizons. In the absence of a heavenly spectacle, Dante shows how the pilgrim's default visual setting is to return automatically and passively 'altogether to Beatrice', whose sight dominates and yet cannot be contained, always evading the pilgrim's attempts to capture her. Moreover, Dante has the pilgrim enact the process of optical re-adjustment that peering into the infinite and seeing Beatrice will require, fundamental yet unbearable, just as upon first sight the eye must acclimatize to sunlight.

Dante constructs the whole journey through Paradise as a series of turns back to Beatrice (Christ's mirror), even as the pilgrim ascends to the (invisible) Empyrean he observes:

> Little by little faded from sight; therefore

[15] *Paradiso*, 3.124-129, pp.72-3.

my seeing nothing and my love constrained me
to return with my eyes to Beatrice […]
  The beauty I saw transcends all measure, not
only beyond us, but surely I believe that only its
Maker enjoys it fully. [16]

[a poco a poco al mio veder s'estinse,
per che tornar con li occhi a Bëatrice
 nulla vedere e amor mi costrinse…
  La bellezza ch' io vidi si trasmoda
non pur di là da noi, ma certo io credo
che solo il suo Fattor tutta la goda.]

Dante suggests that even as the power of the pilgrim's vision falters, his mind still comes back to the image of Beatrice: 'her eyes' and 'that sweet smile [which] separates my mind from myself'. She offers him an out-of-body experience, enabling his vision to become purely contemplative and intellectual. Thus, Beatrice's eyes mirror not only an insight into the pilgrim's soul or the true reality of heaven and God, but a vision capable of reflecting and mediating on the eternal, preparing the pilgrim for his Beatific Vision of God.

Dante juxtaposes Bonaventure's image of the *speculum inferius* or inferior mirror of man with the superior mirror of God throughout *Paradiso*: in Canto IX, Cunizza observes the heavenly intelligences (angels and their associated spheres) as glass-like: 'Above there are mirrors, you call them/ Thrones, and from them God's judging shines to/ us, and so such talk seems good to us' ['Sù sono specchi, voi dicete Troni,/ onde refulge a noi Dio giudicante,/ sì che questi parlar ne paion buoni'].[17] This suggests that the clarity with which the soul apprehends the good depends on the relative proximity of the heavenly sphere they inhabit to God (making those closest to God within this hierarchy better receivers and transmitters of His judgements). In Canto XXVIII, Adam exhibits the ability to read the pilgrim's mind in the omniscient mirror of God: 'I discern your desire better than you do/ whatever is most sure to you,/ for I see it in the truthful Mirror that makes itself/ like other things, but other things cannot make / him like them' ['la voglia tua discern meglio/ che tu qualunque cosa t'è più certa,/ perch'io la veggio nel verace Speglio'].[18] Dante distinguishes between God's

[16] *Paradiso*, 30.13-21, pp.600-1.
[17] *Paradiso*, 9.61-63, pp.190-1.
[18] *Paradiso*, 28.104-6, pp.522-3.

ability to resemble all possibilities or things with His creation who can never fully reflect God – thus God simultaneously transcends His creation yet is intimately connected to it.

Dante's presentation of the inferior mirror of man as linked with the Great Chain of Being has its roots in Bonaventure's theology, who saw creation as a hierarchy of divine reflections. Bonaventure's metaphor of mirrors has a scriptural basis, for instance in Wisdom 7:26, wisdom is portrayed as 'the unspotted mirror of the power of God'.[19] In his commentary, *Exposition on the Book of Wisdom*, he offers further scriptural evidence for his metaphor of mirrors, and argues that those closest to the divine provide the clearest 'image of the Invisible'[20]:

> It should be noted that the mirror of the Son of God is unstained in act and ability. Following Dionysius, an Angel is also a pure and most clear mirror, though it is still stained in its ability, being at some remove [from the extent of God's power]. The Human Spirit is also a mirror, stained in its act and ability, in which the divine image shines. Indeed all creation is said to be a mirror, because all the invisible things of God are made manifest in it, just as though it were through a trace a him: 'For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.' [Romans 1:20] 'For now we see through a glass, darkly' [Corinthians 13:12]. Furthermore, Holy Scripture is a mirror in that it is comparable to a man contemplating Christ's face in a mirror. [21]

Dante Gabriel Rossetti appropriates this image of the *speculum inferius* (inferior mirror of man), in which man fails to reflect the perfection of God, to highlight the epistemological problem of interpretation: that is the difference between what we see in a mirror, whose reflection is inverting, distorting and limited, and *how* we see, the role our interpretative faculties play in shaping our view of things, our propensity to see what we want to see. Hence, the mirror concurrently offers a literal reflection of the self and is a projection of our worldview onto the self, others and the world around us.

[19] Wisdom, 7:26. Miller, 267.
[20] Bonaventure, *Sancti Bonaventurae opera omnia,* ed. by A.C. Peltier (Paris: Ludovicus Vives 1867), x, p.56 a; translation my own.
[21] Bonaventure, *Sancti Bonaventurae opera omnia*, x, p.56 a; translation my own.

Jerome McGann also argues that problems of interpretation are at the heart of Rossetti's poetics. However, while he suggests that Rossetti is engaged in a secular pastiche of Dante's work and rids 'the otherwise Christian symbology' of its religious content 'to carry purely aesthetic and artisanal significance'[22] he overlooks that these are, originally, problems of exegesis and still retain that lineage.

Sonnet XXXIV in Rossetti's *The House of Life*, 'The Dark Glass' (1871), sequentially depicts a high point in the happy reunion of lover and beloved – positioned as it is between two other sonnets praising the glorified beloved 'Venus Ventrix' and 'The Lamp's Shrine'. It dramatizes the speaker's desire for unity, with himself (psychic unity), the beloved and God. Employing a title that obviously alludes to Corinthians 13.12, Rossetti manipulates the self-conscious narration of his speaker to draw attention to his inadequate ability to reflect, in deed or potency, an encounter with the infinite (God as Love). Rossetti depicts the sensory lens of human subjectivity as an obstacle to divine communion with his beloved, questioning and disowning his own claim to self-knowledge:

> Not I myself know all my love for thee:
> How should I reach so far, who cannot weigh
> To-morrow's dower by gage of yesterday?
> Shall birth and death, and all dark names that be
> As doors and windows bared to some loud sea,
> Lash deaf mine ears and blind my face with spray;
> And shall my sense pierce love,—the last relay
> And ultimate outpost of eternity?
>
> Lo! what am I to Love, the lord of all?
> One murmuring shell he gathers from the sand,—
> One little heart-flame sheltered in his hand.
> Yet through thine eyes he grants me clearest call
> And veriest touch of powers primordial
> That any hour-girt life may understand. [23]

Rossetti's speaker maximizes the ambiguity surrounding his existential status through an immediate negation 'Not I myself know all my love for thee', raising the question of where, precisely, does knowledge about love reside? His use of 'I', 'myself' and 'my' offer the reader a stronger than usual sense of his individual voice which 'Not'

[22] McGann, '*Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, p.30.
[23] 'The Dark Glass', *CW*, p.293.

implicitly undermines. Hence, Rossetti has his speaker oscillate between 'I' and 'what am I' placing his sense of self at an intersection between embodied and disembodied, being and nothingness, existence and non-existence.

Rossetti creates a link between the inexpressibility of human love, and God's ineffability by instilling in his speaker a feeling that love is immeasurable, singular, and beyond his limited understanding. Rossetti demonstrates how his speaker's reliance on sensory experience frustrates his attempts to 'reach' beyond his grasp, and subjectivity, to discern and touch 'eternity' as revealed in the sestet as 'Love, the lord of all'. This ambiguously could denote the beloved, Love personified, God, or a fusion of all three. Rossetti creates the visceral image of a raging sea that is muted and obscured by the 'doors and windows' of his speaker's perception, echoing Blake's famous declaration in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1868) : 'If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern'.[24] Rossetti suggests that all his speaker's lived experience from 'birth' to 'death' and 'all dark names that be' put him at a remove from accessing 'some loud sea' symbolising the boundless, infinite power and majesty of the Creator. His labelling of his speaker's experiences as 'dark' is not incidental rather highlights his dim, faint and weak capacity (an imperfection inherent in all mankind) to reflect God or divine illumination.

Rossetti emphasizes his speaker's restricted understanding of the divine through his use of the imprecise 'some' because he cannot distinguish the sound or sight of this sea from any other, leaving him with only the partial phantom sensation of what is beyond, feeling it cover '[his] face with spray', which inspires his search but will continue to elude him.

'The Dark Glass' is thus a poem about failure of the poet's sensory perception to penetrate or gaze into the mystery of love – leaving him guessing over its status as: 'the last relay/ And ultimate outpost of eternity?'[25], which in itself raises a spiritual issue. Even as the speaker tries to get beyond his bodily limitations, he finds he can

[24] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. xxii

only articulate the indescribability of love by consigning it to a physical settlement, an 'outpost'. Rossetti's speaker implies that love actively guards against any attempts to understand or scrutinize it; and yet this is precisely what he does by re-conceptualising the inconceivable within a physical location – hinting that its remoteness and timelessness might be surpassed, undetectable in the sea of time, yet conceivable in this moment.

However, Rossetti proposes that while the speaker's experience might 'bar' him from adequately expressing the nature of his love or reflecting divinity, he sees in his beloved an undimmed mirror reflecting Love with complete clarity:

> Lo! what am I to Love, the lord of all?
> One murmuring shell he gathers from the sand, -
> One little heart-flame sheltered in his hand.
> Yet through thine eyes he grants me clearest call
> And veriest touch of powers primordial
> That any hour-girt life may understand.

It is the beloved's eyes, like Bonaventure's mirror of Christ, which 'unstained in act and ability' can ultimately offer the speaker an invitation to see and touch Love's 'powers primordial'. Rossetti's speaker thus recalls Dante's consistent use of Beatrice's eyes as reflective portals which contain 'eternity' (the heavens) in her vision, and which enable the pilgrim to enter in and commune with the divine: heavenly spheres, its blessed inhabitants and eventually his Beatific Vision of God. Rossetti's speaker recovers from his Beatrician beloved what he lacks in the sonnet's opening, that is an 'understand[ing]' of himself, of the eternal nature of love and his mortal-divine beloved, who bridges the gap in space and time between the 'lord of all' and 'any hour-girt life' rendering them both 'One' and the same. Furthermore, the beloved provides an answer to the speaker's implicit question, of where knowledge of one's love resides if not with the self, suggesting that love can be found only through intimacy with the eternal because only the infinite can fully understand itself, just as only God can fully comprehend his own mystery.

Thus, Rossetti demonstrates in that it is only through reciprocity in love that the speaker can escape the prison of his own subjectivity. This is reinforced in his 1850

lyric ‘The Mirror’ in which his speaker experiences unrequited love, which he characterizes as akin to losing self-awareness:

> She knew it not, – most perfect pain
> To learn; & this she knew not. Strife
> For me, calms hers, as from the first.
> ’Twas but another bubble burst
> Upon the curdling drought of life: –
> My silent patience mine again.
>
> As who, of forms that crowd unknown
> Within a dusky mirror’s shade,
> Deems such an one himself, and makes
> Some sign; but when the image shakes
> No white, he finds his thought betrayed
> And must seek elsewhere for his own. [26]

Rossetti cannot see himself amongst ‘the forms that crowd unknown’, suggesting that not only does he fail to identify himself but also others, until the external world become obscured from his vision and the one he ‘Deems… himself’ does not correspond to the ‘dusky mirrors’ or the dark glass of his mind. The speaker finds himself alienated both from the mirror of mind (‘his thought betrayed’) and the mirror of creation, so he futilely resorts to seek ‘elsewhere’ for his own image, looking beyond the self to some other ‘sign’ outside of the bounds of the mirror which parallels the image of the ‘curdling drought of life’ implying that his search for meaning will necessarily putrefy. Without a requited love, the speaker will remain trapped in a solipsistic bubble in which all but the existence of the self is unknown. Hence, Rossetti reveals that a reciprocated love is necessary to understand the self, the world and others but also the mirror itself – which represents his psyche but also the entire horizon of creation.

The need for a reciprocated love and a reciprocated gaze that expresses it is endemic also in *Paradiso*: in the sphere of mercury, Dante uses a visual metaphor that draws a parallel between the sight of the blessed soul (Justinian) and the all-pervasive sight of God, which might accurately sum up the entire optical structure of Paradise itself – as a reciprocated look between the human soul and God:

[26] ‘The Mirror’, *CW*, p.462.

"I see well how you nestle within your own
light, and that you shoot it forth from your eyes,
for it flashes when you laugh,
but I do not know who you are, nor why,
worthy soul, you occupy the sphere that veils
itself from mortals within another's rays."
This I addressed to the light that had first
spoken to me, whereat it became much brighter
than before.
Like the sun, which hides in its excess of light,
when the heat has worn away the tempering
of thick vapours:
so in its greater gladness that holy face
became hidden from me within its own rays, and
thus, all enclosed, it answered me
in the mode that the following canto sings.[27]

["Io veggio ben sì come tu t'annidi
nel proprio lume, e che de li occhi il traggi,
perché corusca sì come tu ridi,
ma non so chi tu se' né perché aggi,
anima degna, il grado de la spera
che si vela a' mortai con altrui raggi."
Questo diss' io diritto a la lumera
che pria m'avea parlato, ond' ella fessi
lucente più assai di quel ch' ell' era.
Sì come il sol che si cela elli stessi
per troppa luce, come 'l caldo ha róse
le temperanze d'i vapori spessi:
per più letizia sì mi si nascose
dentro al suo raggio la figura santa,
e così chiusa chiusa mi rispuose
nel modo che 'l seguente canto canta.]

The pilgrim at once sees, and is blinded by, the sight of this soul, who like the rising sun burns so brightly he dispels the morning mist (an analogue for the pilgrim's clouded vision) yet still conceals his true form 'within' the intensity of his own brilliance. The soul's luminosity appears to eclipse itself. Though the pilgrim cannot identify this soul or understand his purpose, he knows by his 'flashes' that he is there and can even make out how his light is transmitted, observing how it 'shoot[s] […] forth from [his] eyes' revealing Dante's adoption of contemporaneous theories of extramission. According to Medieval extramission theories of sight, vision is made possible by visual rays emanating from the eye outwards to the visible object. The

[27] *Paradiso*, 5.124-139, p.110-111.

observing eye emits a cone of rays that makes up its optical field, so that whatever is illuminated within this field is visible.[28] In a similar vein, Rossetti depicts the speaker of 'The Dark Glass' as trapped within his own optical field – rendering all beyond it obscure – until the beloved expands the horizons of his limited perception.

Dante's repeated use of the dawning sun as a figure for Christ invites a comparison here between the soul's eye and God's eternal vision. Rossetti echoes this association in 'Heart's Hope' because his speaker views Christ's Sacred Heart (representing his love for mankind) as 'Tender as dawn's first hill-fire' and the speaker of 'Beauty's Pageant sees a 'dawn-pulse at the heart of heaven'.[29] God, like the soul 'veils [Himself] from mortals' and yet His light is concurrently reflected outward to humanity from 'within another's rays'. God takes the shape of the pupil within the omniscient eye of Paradise, emitting an 'eternal fountain'[30] ['l'etterna fontana'] of light, surrounded completely by innumerable reflectors that multiple and radiate his light outwards – hiding his 'holy face' from view. Hence, just as the sun is visible (yet dazzling) on earth, man is aware of God's presence feeling His divine 'heat' (that cleanses the haze from man's vision) yet unable to comprehend His true nature and mysterious workings that remain 'hidden' from view and 'all enclosed', secret, elusive and knowable only to God Himself. Yet, Dante hints that there is a way that the human soul can receive elucidation from God, that is through the process of artistic composition and interpretation on the part of the reader who beyond the scope of the narrative is engaged in a perpetual search for 'answer[s] […] in the mode the following canto sings'.

Through this analogy, Dante also demonstrates that it is not the soul's vision that illuminates itself, rather always the eternal living light that 'pours forth'[31] ['che si deriva'] from God. What looks to the pilgrim like rays emanating from the eyes of the souls in heaven really originates from the divine light above. As Beatrice points out, it is the 'happy nature' of God combined with the capacity for good in the human soul that shines 'like gladness through the pupil of a living eye'['come letizia per pupilla

[28] Thomas F. Glick. et al. (eds) 'Optics and Catoptrics', *Medieval Science, Technology, and Medicine: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2005), p.373.
[29] 'Beauty's Pageant', *CW*, l.1, p.284.
[30] *Paradiso*, 31.93, pp.624-5.
[31] *Paradiso*, 30.86, pp.604-5.

viva'].[32] The ray emitted from their eyes is itself a visual manifestation of God's sight, which reaches out and lights up the diaphanous medium of the soul and reflects out from the soul. Hence, God illumines the vision of the blessed from within and without, holding every soul in a reciprocated gaze.

Reciprocity, and a sense of being enveloped in the optical field of the divine, categorizes the vision of all souls in Heaven. The pilgrim demonstrates how the human soul communicates with God through sight, declaring to Folquet of Marseilles: 'God sees all things, and your sight so inhims/itself […] that no desire can flee from you.'[33] ['Dio vede tutto, e tuo veder s'inluia […]sic he nulla voglia di se a te puot' esser fuia']. Dante invents a string of new reflexive pronouns such as 'inhims itself' ['s'inluia'], 'inyou myself'[34] ['m'intuassi], 'inme youself'[35] ['t'inmii'] to emphasise the inextricable link between the human soul and God, and the entanglement of subject-object relations in Paradise. Moreover, Dante shows that such reciprocity is not restricted to wordplay but operates within and beyond the narrative limits of the poem, the pilgrim sees:

> Lift therefore your gaze to the high wheels
> with me, reader, straight to that place where the
> one and the other motion strike each other,
> and there begin to marvel at the art of that
> Master who within himself loves it so much that
> He never moves his eye away from it.[36]
>
> [Leva dunque, lettor, a l'alte rote
> meco la vista, dritto a quella parte
> dove l'un moto e l'altro sipercuote,
> e lì comincia a vagheggiar ne l'arte
> di quel maestro che dentro a sé l'ama
> tanto che mai da lei l'occhio non parte.]

A look is exchanged between the blessed soul who gazes at God and God who looks perpetually and unflinchingly back, in a gaze which is ultimately self-referential because God's all-seeing vision illuminates the vision of the soul and the soul finds itself 'marvel[ing]' at the art of God's work. Dante does so to position the reader to

[32] *Paradiso*, 2.144, pp.50-1.
[33] *Paradiso*, 9.73-5, pp.192-3.
[34] *Paradiso*, 9.80, pp.192-3.
[35] *Paradiso*, 9.81, pp.192-3.
[36] *Paradiso*, 10.7-12, pp.206-7.

participate as an active observer within this dynamic, cutting straight to 'that place' where the two gazes 'strike each other', rendering the relationship between the human soul and God a visual feast for the eyes and suggesting that the pilgrim in complicit in making a spectacle out of Paradise. Not only does the reader engage with the spectacle the pilgrim creates but the workings of God also seem to partake in his vision of them.

In 'Mid-Rapture' (1881) Rossetti portrays the height of spiritual fulfilment to be found in physical union with the beloved. Rossetti reconstructs Dante's vision of Paradise by employing his speaker to view his beloved as a source of fascination, infinity and supreme power. This is because her 'summoning eyes'[37] recall the salvific power of Beatrice's sight (raising the pilgrim up through the heavenly spheres and reorienting the pilgrim's outlook) offering the speaker 'love-world's new sunrise'[38] and an invitation from on high because she is:

> […]attuned above
> All modulation of the deep-bowered dove,
> Is like a hand laid softly on the soul;
> Whose hand is like a sweet voice to control
> Those worn tired brows it hath the keeping of:—[39]

The speaker finds that his beloved is harmonized with the eternal music of the spheres because her 'voice' is tempered to the movement of the 'deep-bowered dove' or Holy Spirit, which he imagines as nestled within the 'high garden'[40] ['l'eccelso giardino] of Heaven. The speaker hears a sound so powerful that it can bridge the gap between the physical and spiritual 'like a hand laid softly on the soul' and draws the speaker into an accord with the eternal peace of the dove, transforming his 'worn tired brows' (embodying his worldly cares) into the picture of spiritual serenity: Love's 'worshipping face'[41]. The speaker experiences a state of rapture as an internalized vision of Dante's *Paradiso*: filled with reflections of divine light, harmonious song, and himself encircled by the divine embrace of the beloved, asking:

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[37] 'Mid-Rapture', *CW*, l.2, p.289.
[38] 'Mid-Rapture', *CW*, l.3, p.289.
[39] 'Mid-Rapture', *CW*, l.4-8, p.289.
[40] *Paradiso*, 26.110, pp.524-5. Dante depicts the structure of the highest part of Heaven as Celestial Rose. For the Empyrean as garden, see also 23.72, 31.97, 32.39.
[41] 'Mid-Rapture', *CW*, l.11, p.289.

What word can answer to thy word,—what gaze
  To thine, which now absorbs within its sphere
  My worshipping face, till I am mirrored there
Light-circled in a heaven of deep-drawn rays?
    What clasp, what kiss mine inmost heart can prove,
    O lovely and beloved, O my love?[42]

Rossetti suggests that his speaker in both speech and sight becomes 'absorb[ed]' by the beloved, attuning himself to her heavenly 'sphere' so that she who was the object of his vision begins to take up his entire optical field. Hence, the more the speaker objectifies his beloved the more self-conscious he becomes of the 'control' she has over him, until she becomes master of his subjectivity and he loses control over his own image; becoming 'mirrored there/ Light-circle in a heaven of deep-drawn rays'. The speaker, like Dante's pilgrim, is turned into a mere reflector of divine light and finds himself enclosed by innumerable and depthless 'rays' (just as the pilgrim finds himself surrounded by an amphitheatre of blessed souls all reflecting God's light) yet Rossetti suggests the speaker's surrender is a welcome, even longed for, one, because he looks for a way to reciprocate with his beloved, searching his 'inmost heart' for the clasp or kiss that can replicate the heaven of being under his beloved's gaze.

Similarly, enclosed in a prismatic and circular 'heaven of deep-drawn rays' Dante's pilgrim experiences the vision of the Godhead ('the goal of all my desires'[43] ['al fine di tutt' disii']) as the obliteration of all sight and comprehension:

  that circulation which seemed in you to be
generated like reflected light, surveyed my
eyes somewhat,
  within itself, in its very own color, seemed to
me to be painted with our effigy, by which my
sight was all absorbed.
  Like the geometer who is all intent to square
the circle and cannot find, for all his thought, the
principle he needs:
  such was I at that miraculous sight; I wished to
see how the image fitted the circle and how it
enwheres itself there.
  But my own feathers were not sufficient for
that, except that my mind was struck by a flash in
which its desire came.
  Here my high imagining failed of power; but

[42] 'Mid-Rapture', *CW*, l.9-14, p.289.
[43] *Paradiso* 33.46, pp.662-3.

already my desire and the *velle* were turned, like
a wheel being moved evenly,
  by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.[44]

[Quella circulazion che sì concetta
pareva in te come lume reflesso,
da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,
  dentro da sé, dal suo colore stesso
mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo.
  Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige
per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige:
  tal era io a quella vista nova;
veder voleva come si convenne
l'imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova.
  Ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne,
se non che la mia mente fu percossa
da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
  A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa,
ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l *velle*,
sì come rota ch' igualmente è mossa,
l'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.]

Both the pilgrim and Rossetti's speaker find their field of vision 'absorbed', so that sight, knowledge and articulation all seem to cease completely.

Dante leaves the pilgrim unable to find any rational, geometrical solution for his 'miraculous' and (as the Italian *nova* suggests) altogether new vision, beyond his experience and the sway of rationality, subsuming the pilgrim's desire to know how the shapes fit with his original desire to experience the absolute, divine 'Love' that rules the cosmos, and quieting the pilgrim's restless and inquisitive 'high imagining'. Moreover, Dante neatly deals with the epistemological problem raised by his pilgrim's Beatific Vision: when immersed in the perfect sight of the divine, how can the wonder of God be articulated? When God is unique and beyond all compare, what particularities can be made out or compared to others and what perspective can the pilgrim take when all subject-object relations are gone? Dante seems to suggest that to see with perfect vision (cleansed of human misperception) is to be silent. Thus, Dante implies what is at the heart of eternity is the 'same desire and mystery'[45] that

[44] *Paradiso*, 33.127-45, pp.666-7 .
[45] 'The Sea-Limits', *CW*, l.22, p.18.

permeates all creation, to be discerned only in silence, offering the possibility to write the incommensurable or feel the ineffable.

Rossetti's speaker similarly raises questions that are unanswerable, expressing his urgent desire to reciprocate the spiritual and sensual love he finds in his beloved in sufficient measure; but also in 'thy word' suggesting a desire for reciprocity with the Logos, the word of God or principle of divine reason and creative order.. Yet this is a measure that cannot be quantified, revealing that in the face of a love that resembles the highest of all loves no answer can be given, no measure will ever be sufficient but to continually ask the question (the stanza begins and ends with questions) until the very love-speak he uses is reduced to a trinity of linguistic permutations of the sentiment that invigorates his whole vision of heaven: 'the Love that moves the sun and the other stars' (adverb, adjective and noun): 'lovely', 'beloved', 'my love'. Moreover, Rossetti's repeated use of 'O' represents visually and aurally the speaker's submission to his beloved because he starts to mimic the circular structure that characterizes their relationship and his vision of Paradise, a linguistic signifier of his having touched the eternal and ineffable, reducing his speech to only a breathless, emotive gasp. Thus, Rossetti's speaker dramatizes the semantic problem with emotional and religious language, as little meaning can be derived when the speaker tries to enumerate or empirically verify what is unobservable, immeasurable and steeped in sentiment.

Rossetti makes this semantic problem explicit through his lyric 'Soothsay' (1871) – a poem that extolls the virtues of living for the moment as a spiritual act (indicated by sonnet's working title 'Commandments') – his speaker declares:

> Let lore of all Theology
> Be to thy soul what it can be:
> But know, - the Power that fashions man
> Measured not out thy little span
> For thee to take the meting-rod
> In turn, and so approve on God
> Thy science of Theometry.[46]

[46] 'Soothsay', *CW*, l.78-83, p.383.

Rossetti suggests that neither the study of science nor religion can fully do justice to the mysteries that pervade the universe, so that even while the eternal questions might be expressed through theology, they provide the speaker with limited consolation: 'Be to thy soul what it can be' that is make of it what you will because it is an inherently subjective, self-reflexive enterprise (speaking only to the select few). Moreover, for all its objectivity, science overlooks its inability to quantify what is beyond its scope to measure, which the speaker emphasizes through his juxtaposition of 'little span' and 'the Power that fashions man'.

Rossetti seems to have picked up on an idea in Dante that he carries right through all his poetic works: that we in our experience of life treat Love (both mortal and divine) as though it is a problem that can be solved (or an obstacle that can be surmounted), which can be quantified or measured, compartmentalized and rationalized. This is because of the feeling of order and unity being in Love or in relation with the divine gives us: we feel centred, harmonious and as though we have the key to unlocking our desires. Yet what Rossetti and Dante both insist upon time and time again is that Love, God, and others are essentially mysterious, unknowable and ineffable.

Both Rossetti and Dante show that we cannot square the circle that is we cannot make sense of the infinite and turn it into something manageable, containable, restricted and limited like ourselves because, although we crave it, Love will never share our limitations or imperfections and its form will remain as it has always been: circular, continuous, and consistent. Finally, it is only the human inconstant that will change Love's position in relation to the circle – just as Love finds himself in relation to Dante in *La Vita Nuova*: 'I am as the center of the circle […] but with thee it is not thus'[47] that is off-centre and out of the loving embrace of God. Rossetti's speaker expresses this most plainly in 'Parted Presence' (1872-3):

> Love, I speak to your heart,
> Your heart that is always here.
> Oh draw me deep to its sphere,
> Though you and I are apart;
> And yield, by the spirit's art,
> Each distant gift that is dear.
> O love, my love, you are here![48]

[47] *NL*, p.48.
[48] 'Parted Presence', *CW*, ll.1-7, p.411.

For Rossetti, the proof of man's inability to solve the mysteries of love, time or God is written into the fabric of the universe. In his song 'The Sea-Limits' (1870) his speaker observes this in a sea tossed shell:

> That same desire and mystery
> The echo of the whole sea's speech.
> And all mankind is thus at heart
> Not anything but what thou art
> And Earth, Sea, Man, are all in each.[49]

Desire and mystery are the two principles left to the pilgrim of the *Commedia* because although Dante portrays the pilgrim's Beatific Vision of God as the obliteration of all sight and articulation with the pilgrim's gaze subsumed by a 'flash' or as the Italian 'fulgore' more vividly describes the brightness, splendour or radiance of the divine gaze, which the pilgrim experiences in the form of a blinding light, leaving him unable to describe or really even sense what his vision was because 'Here [his] high imagining failed of power'. The pilgrim struggles to recall the brief glimpse of insight he received and admits that his poetic sight is impaired by the limitations of human language, which fails to adequately describe the divine. Rather it can only imprecisely express a vision that exceeds everything that came before it – leaving the pilgrim and his poem in awe of its 'power'. Immersed in the divine mystery, Dante presents the visionary climax of his poem as not the annihilation of desire but its rekindling, as it becomes, in the pilgrim's reverential silence, re-orientated and integrated 'like a wheel being moved evenly' to God's will, whose force remains as fundamental and motivating as ever, though its object remains a mystery.

Rossetti also replicates the cosmological composition of Dante's *Paradiso* through pictorial imagery. As has been shown, Dante depicts all heavenly bodies as revolving around and enclosing a central point of Light, that is God, so that these reflective bodies radiate His light and love outwards to the rest of creation. Rossetti consistently imitates this structure of the circle (reflections) and its centre (God as all-seeing mirrored eye), by illustrating the beloved as the central motivating force of the universe with all beyond her sphere as mere reflections of her loveliness.

[49] 'The Sea-Limits', *CW*, ll.22-28 p.18.

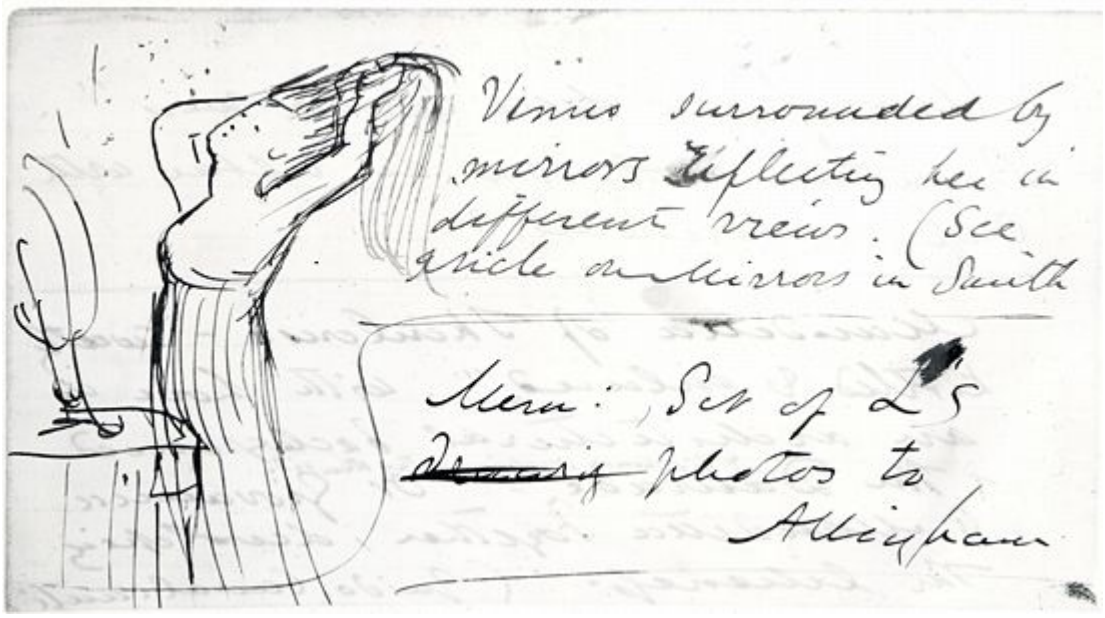

Fig.12 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Venus Surrounded by Mirrors reflecting her in different views', 1863. *Yale Center for British Art.*

Around 1863, Rossetti proposed in his notebook a subject for a painting: 'Venus surrounded by mirrors reflecting her in different views' (fig.11). Despite the fact that Rossetti never carried out his design plans, and the painting was unrealized his conceptual process remains significant. He conceived of a painting that would depict the physical embodiment of Love 'surrounded' or encircled by her own multiple reflections. Although we cannot make out exactly how Rossetti would have represented these multiple views of Love from his drawing, as Jerome McGann highlights,

> Rossetti [had in a sense, already] painted multiple versions of this picture – paintings and drawings of women holding mirrors, standing before mirrors, looking into mirrors. What is particularly interesting about the notebook idea is Rossetti's desire to achieve multiple perspectives in a single picture[50]

What is apparent is that Rossetti wanted to complete a work in which Venus (classical symbol of both divine and earthly love) is enclosed by mirrors, that reflect different aspects of her image, and by extension beauty and sacred love. Hence, his proposed work offers the presentation of Love from every angle, so that the infinite variety of Love surrounds not just the painting's subject but the viewer of the picture. Moreover, what his sketch does suggest is that Venus (or Love) would, simultaneously, look in a mirror of her own, which implies that there is an aspect of love and the divine that

[50] McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game that Must Be Lost*, p.126.

mankind (and the viewer) are not privy to – preserving the essential mystery at the heart of love and the divine.

Fig.13 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Sancta Lilias', 1879. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.

In 'Sancta Lilias' (fig.13) Rossetti portrays the Imparadised beloved, like Dante's 'truthful Mirror' of God, as reflecting and emitting divine light as represented by the natural source of light casting a shadow that falls on the right behind the figure and the visible halos of light that can be discerned as emanating from her face and hands. The most ethereal of all Rossetti's female figures, she appears to be created almost entirely of light, removed of her natural colouring as though her physicality has been absorbed into the spiritual order – with the sole exception of her halo, whose golden hues highlight the golden brown of her hair, eyes and lips. Rossetti here portrays the subject as almost wholly subsumed in divine light but still bearing resemblances of her former earthly self – visually representing the overlap or bridge between the mortal and divine.

Fig. 13. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel,* 1875-8. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard.

In Rossetti's original composition of *The Blessed Damozel* (fig.14), he depicts the damozel's gaze as salvific, omniscient and offering a glimpse of the eternal, through a pattern of imagery that associates the beloved's infinitely deep eyes with the 'circling charm'[51] of Heaven and God's divine sight. Like Beatrice, the damozel's sight becomes emblematic of divine vision because she can see with clarity and precision, not only the arrangement of heaven and activities of other heavenly souls, but herself in relation to the rest of Heaven, observing:

> Around her, lovers, newly met
> 'Mid deathless love's acclaims,
> Spoke evermore among themselves
> Their heart-remembered names;
> And the souls mounting up to God

[51] 'The Blessed Damozel', *PNE*, l.4, p.5.

Went by her like thin flames.[52]

The damozel's vision recalls the pilgrim's sight of the heavenly intelligences (or angels that govern the nine heavenly spheres or circles 'of fire') that surround God, who appears as the all-seeing pupil of an amphitheatre of reflectors:

> Each spark followed its fiery circle, and
> they were so many that their number enthousands
> itself beyond the doubling of a chessboard.[53]
>
> [L'incendio suo seguiva ogne scintilla,
> ed eran tante che 'l numero loro
> più che 'l doppiar de li scacchi s'inmilla.]

Dante's use of 'L'incendio' to denote the heavenly intelligences is evocative of a fire or blaze, so that the damozel's vision of 'souls' flying up to God as 'thin flames' accurately recreates the upward and circular motion of heavenly bodies aflame. Moreover, the damozel rearticulates the pilgrim's vision transforming the 'fiery circle[s]' of heaven to the infinite sight of loving souls embracing.

In the oil painting *The Blessed Damozel*, Rossetti positions the beloved as enclosed by a series of mirror images in the form of angels (below), innumerable tiers of blessed couples (above) just beyond which can be discerned a golden river of light and the image of a dove nestled at the pinnacle of the canvas and Paradise. Rossetti's illustration of the dove radiating golden light outwards suggests that the basic motivating force of the loving souls and heaven itself is the Holy Spirit, symbolising hope (of the soul's return to God's loving embrace) and divine love.

Moreover, he parallels Dante's inclusion of a river of light in the Empyrean, which the pilgrim recounts as

> And I saw light in the form of a river, radiant
> as gold, between two banks
> painted with wondrous spring blossoming;
> from that flowing issued living sparks,
> and on every side they entered into the flowers,
> like rubies circumscribed by gold;[54]

[52] 'The Blessed Damozel', *PNE*, l.37-42, p.5.
[53] *Paradiso*, 28.91-93, pp.562-3.
[54] *Paradiso*, 30.61-6, pp.602-3.

[E vidi lume in forma di rivera
fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive
dipinte di mirabil primavera;
  di tal fiumana uscian faville vive,
e d'ogne parte si mettien ne' fiori,
quasi rubin che oro circunscrive;]

Both the pilgrim and the viewer of Rossetti's painting see divine power and goodness flowing out from on high through the tiers of heaven and down to all creation. Furthermore, Rossetti duplicates the golden river pictorially in the 'golden bar'[55] the damozel leans out of, rendering her the physical embodiment of God's love. Rossetti depicts the damozel as almost overflowing from Heaven in order to enact God's salvific agency and lift up her beloved. In Rossetti's poem, she anticipates the fruition of her desire:

"When round his head the aureole clings,
  And he is clothed in white,
I'll take his hand and go with him
  To the deep wells of light;
As unto a stream we will step down,
  And bathe there in God's sight.[56]

Rossetti's damozel draws attention to the cosmological arrangement of Dante's *Paradiso*, by doubling the image of the all-seeing eye at the centre of creation to portray her own 'eyes' themselves 'deep wells of light' as the sole route to Heaven because it is only through her privileged access, as one of the blessed, that the speaker can partake of her grace and gain a glimpse of the Empyrean. Rossetti shows through use of rhyme here the implicit connection between 'light' and 'sight', because it is through the light (love and goodness) of the damozel that the speaker finds himself illuminated with divine revelation, grace and salvation. Yet, the damozel does suggest, like Dante, that moving from human experience to communion with God necessitates that vision itself be subsumed into 'God's sight'. The implication is again that for reunion to be possible, sight must be vanquished – and that this does not result in the end of desire, rather it rekindles it. This is because though the damozel longs to go 'hand in hand' with her lover, Rossetti's narration betrays her original desire for communion with the divine:

"All this is when he comes." She ceased.

[55] 'The Blessed Damozel', *PNE*, l.2, p.3.
[56] 'The Blessed Damozel', *PNE*, l.73-8, p.5.

> The light thrilled towards her, fill'd
> With angels in strong level flight.
> Her eyes prayed, and she smile'd.[57]

Rossetti hints that the end of the damozel's speech signals the end of her separation from the rest of Paradise and God's loving embrace because God 'bathes' her with his sight that 'thrilled towards her' and the damozel's 'eyes' reciprocate reverentially, expressing her joy physically through her 'smile'.

Rossetti's placement of religious and aesthetic icons in the painting concurrently suggests enclosure and hierarchy, because while the damozel is surrounded by reflections she remains visibly separate from the highest love of all (Holy Spirit) and the spiritual joy of the loving souls, implying that she cannot be fully satisfied in God's loving embrace – which only serves to stoke and reignite her desires – until she draws the lover through the 'golden barriers'[58], an event her salvific vision foreshadows and promises but which Rossetti depicts as infinitely delayed, leaving us with the 'vague' sight of her lament. Thus Rossetti simultaneously suggests the damozel is the victim of the structural inequality in Paradise (an inequality that keeps the lover at a remove from her) and yet also that she is the victimizer, because of the underlying anxiety that invigorates both poem and painting.

Rossetti disrupts the expectations of the viewer in his depiction of the female form, by drawing attention to the construction of his artworks and rendering the dynamics of vision ambiguous. Although the viewer might expect to find embedded in Rossetti's aesthetics a divide between the male as the active spectator or subject and the female as the passive spectacle or object (so that the male spectator is ideally situated to maximize his voyeuristic power over female figure, by controlling them both in and out of the artwork's narrative reach) instead they find neither: the female figure is disinterestedly looking away from the viewer (usually at a mirror, the reflection of which we are not privy to) or looking out of the canvas itself (towards something beyond the viewer or to some uncertain vista).

[57] 'The Blessed Damozel', *PNE*, l.133-8, p.6.
[58] 'The Blessed Damozel', *PNE*, l.142, p.9.

Rossetti constructs and dismantles subject-object relations in his depiction of the Imparadised beloved in order to portray the beloved as a source of fascination and divine mystery. Rossetti's languidly reclining male figure (of the predella) has his gaze firmly pointed upwards towards his beloved, yet the damozel does not look back consolingly towards him but out of the canvas altogether. Her look beyond the confines of the artwork (coupled with the inherent ambiguity of the poem) emphasises that the damozel is not trapped in the fantasy or vision of her earthbound lover's creation because while he may not see her as she truly is (preferring a reflection or projection of his own construction) she can see beyond his limited earthly vision and beyond the viewer of the artwork. Hers is the infinite vision of Love, which is beyond time, space and mankind, she sees the earth spin 'like a fretful midge' and 'Time like a pulse shake fierce/ Through all the worlds'.[59]

As such, the vision of Rossetti's female subjects point towards something beyond the self and its worldly concerns, so that in Rossetti's masterpiece *Beata Beatrix* (fig.11) in which he depicts the ascension of Beatrice's soul to Paradise (bringing her face to face with God) he can only illustrate her (as Dante presents his pilgrim blinded by the Beatific Vision) with her eyes closed, no longer looking within the world at all, reflecting the divine mystery she becomes united with. Rossetti paradoxically represents her ascension to a higher kind of vision as an ecstatic, self-emptying mystical experience that is beyond communication.

Overall then, Dante's presentation of Paradise employs an elaborate hierarchy of mirrors that corresponds to the theology of Bonaventure (from his inferior mirror of man to the perfect mirror of God), the Great Chain of Being but also the soul's individual capacity for Good. Yet, he implicitly undermines this through his portrayal of the pilgrim's sight of God as an all-seeing eye emitting the divine light that enables all vision, in accordance with the extramission theories of sight: the blessed, pilgrim and all of creation is held with the observing eye of God, making up His optical field, and is only engendered with vision through the operation of His gaze (the emanation of divine light that illumes all). Rossetti picks up on this dichotomy and uses the self-conscious narration of his speakers to draw attention to the interpretative filter of

[59] 'The Blessed Damozel', *PNE*, l.36-50, p.5.

human subjectivity, so that the mirror becomes in Rossetti's paintings and poetry a source of anxiety and a kind of fleshly prison from which the speaker or subject struggles to transcend. Yet, it is in his speaker's self-conscious struggle to articulate and see something beyond the bodily that Rossetti reveals that while the spirit may ultimately fail to escape its earthly confines, the trappings of the body, in this life, through poetic and artistic expression the spirit, God and even Paradise might be described and located against what it is not – that is the corporal, transient and mutable.

The mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux

Bernard of Clairvaux had influential friends. Amongst them was Aimeric, a cardinal and chancellor of the Church of Rome. He asked Bernard to answer some difficult theological questions, which, in his humility, Bernard felt unworthy to address. He was, however, fascinated by one of these questions: Why love God? This question, Bernard wrote, 'tastes sweeter'[60] than the rest so he responded to Aimeric with an exceptional treatise, *On Loving God* (*De diligendo Deo*).[61] In his prologue, he answers Aimeric directly: 'You wish, then, to hear from me why and how God ought to be loved. I answer: The cause of loving God is God himself. The way to love him is without measure'.[62]

In *On Loving God*, written in the early 1120s, Bernard sums up his understanding of God not only through the Trinitarian concept of God as the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, but also (as he often reiterates in his Sermons) he takes very seriously the idea that 'God is love'[63]. According to Bernard, God is love itself, making love God's essential nature, His very substance. This has implications for human nature too; created in God's image and likeness, we share in His loving nature, and so mankind is made up of natural lovers.[64] Furthermore, he suggests that the very act of loving taps into the aspect of human nature that is most like God, so that by surrendering to our desire for God utterly, not only will we fulfil our essential purpose as lovers and flourish as human beings but also encounter the divinity that exists within ourselves. Embracing God, then, reveals not only the meaning of our existence but enables us to locate the divine within the world, and within mankind.

Bernard's mysticism, as mediated through the *Commedia*, provides a context for the mystical expression present in Rossetti's works – which is itself a kind of apotheosis of *eros*. As such, the genealogy of Bernard's metaphors of loving relationships, especially marriage, to describe the bond between man and God deserve attention,

[60] 'On Loving God', *BCSW*, p.49.
[61] Harmless, p.41.
[62] 'On Loving God', *BCSW*, p.49.
[63] 1 John 4:16; 'On Loving God', *BCSW*, p.87.
[64] Harmless, p.56.

before demonstrating the implications for Rossetti's poetry and painting, because they are significant to the theological traditions that shaped Dante's intellectual concerns.

Using erotic language to convey the urgency and primacy of soul's journey to God has long been an established trope of Christian theology, art or scripture, flourishing even amongst monastic religious traditions. One of the earliest Christian commentators on the biblical Song of Songs, Origen of Alexandria, identified that only erotic language is adequate to express the profound relationship of the human soul to God because 'there is no difference whether God is said to be loved with *agape* or loved with *eros*, nor do I think anyone can be blamed if he calls God *eros*, just as John called him *agape*'.[65]

Origen picks up on something later developed by Bernard, which is that at its core, and whether we call it *agape* or *eros*, human nature is motivated by endless desire. Bernard proposed that mankind misguidedly searches for fulfilment in all manner of transitory pleasures: clothing, wealth or beauty. However, what remains constant is that we are never satiated and always want more. For Bernard, these longings indicate that human beings are essentially amorous (designed to love) so that only what is eternal and perpetually desirable – God – can gratify our innate and voracious cravings. God loved mankind from the very first, desiring us to be, and covertly instilling into our being the inclination to love him back. Hence, God courts man to reciprocate:

> God causes you to desire and he himself satisfies your desire […] God is the cause of loving God […] He himself provides the occasion. He himself creates the longing. He himself fulfils the desire. He himself causes himself to be (or, rather, to be made) such that he should be loved. He hopes to be so happily loved that no one will love him in vain. His love both prepares and rewards ours.[66]

Bernard demonstrates that it is not God who is lacking; on the contrary, God is superabundant and infinitely generous. Rather, it is to satisfy what is lacking in man that we turn to God. Moreover, desire itself begins and ends with God, because it is God who brings about our love for Him, and is the goal towards which all love moves.

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[65] Adam G. Cooper, 'The Story of God and Eros', *God and Eros: The Ethos of the Nupital Mystery*, ed. Colin Patterson et al. (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), p.94.
[66] 'On Loving God', *BCSW*, p.72-3.

Not all loves are equal for Bernard though. While we may start by loving God self-interestedly, we learn to find God inherently desirable. According to Bernard, once man has reached the heights of spiritual maturation, he might taste, if only momentarily, the complete self-abandonment of mystical love:

> When shall this flesh and blood, this earthly dwelling of my soul, be able to go up there? When shall my soul, drunk with divine love and forgetful of self […] rejoice wholly in God and, clinging to God, become one spirit with Him and say: 'My flesh and my heart have fainted away, Thou art the God of my heart, and my share in eternity' [Psalm 73:26]. Count him blessed and holy, who in the course of this mortal life has been gifted such a rare experience, even if it is only once and lasts only a moment. To lose yourself, as if you were no longer in existence, to feel yourself no more, emptied and almost obliterated, arises not from human love but is a conversion sent from heaven. [67]

Bernard suggests that those who open themselves up to God's love completely will find their apparently paradoxical desire to touch the infinite satisfied, bringing together their desire for spiritual communion and physical intimacy. His intense focus on the 'flesh' 'blood' and 'heart' of the human soul and the physicality of God as an intoxicating substance that can be savoured and held on to, portray Him as a source of both spiritual and physical satisfaction. He transforms '[my] share in eternity' into a kind of sexual encounter: 'clinging to God' at the climax of which the individual finds that he is 'emptied and almost obliterated'. Only then does the individual become 'one spirit with Him'.

There are a number of implications in Bernard's view that resonate with Rossetti because such spiritual-sexual desire requires a real object to function, and although it is not necessary for the desired object to be in reach at any given moment, it is enough for the speaker or subject to believe that it is, has been, or will arrive sometime. Sexually desiring God is made possible by His perceived absence and presence: on the one hand He is invisible, nowhere to be seen, yet his presence on earth *in persona Christi* or via the beloved, at least for a time, makes God accessible, relatable and attainable through the mediation of the Word.

[67] Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diligendo Deo*, X.27; trans. my own. For the Latin text of Bernard's writings see *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, ed. J. Leclerq, C. H. Talbot, and H. Rochais (Cisterian Edition: Rome, 1957– 1977), vol. 3, p.142.

The incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ reproduces the direct experience available to all lovers: the anxiety and frustration of longing for an ideal love, the long-awaited reciprocity and loss of a love that is unconditional and the yearning to be reunited with a long-lost love. This analogy of the lost beloved extends to God. In fact, God is in a sense the original Lover because his absence from the world is felt as the same sense of despair, futility, abandonment, exhaustion and hope for His return that is felt for the lost beloved. Moreover, longing for the divine suggests desiring something other than the flesh, which is reasonable to talk about in sexual terms because what attracts one person to another is irreducible to physical desire but is made up of something else that is difficult to locate or define. This may be articulated as akin to a kind of praise, reverence, faith, captivation or indulgence in and concern for the beloved, implying an emotional and psychological association that we intuit as arising from the internal nature of the beloved. Thus, there are aspects of the inexpressible in our relationship with the beloved and God. Furthermore, desiring the infinite is a longing for a true love that is not inconstant but inimitable, exceptional and boundless.

'Born with her life, creature of poignant thirst/ And exquisite hunger'[68]: conjugal union, and Beatific Vision.

> Mother of the Fair Delight,
> Thou handmaid perfect in God's sight,
> Now sitting fourth beside the Three,
> Thyself a woman-Trinity,—
> Being a daughter borne to God,
> Mother of Christ from stall to rood,
> And wife unto the Holy Ghost:—
> […]
> Ah! knew'st thou of the end, when first
> That Babe was on thy bosom nurs'd?—
> Or when He tottered round thy knee
> Did thy great sorrow dawn on thee?—
> […]
> To whose white bed had come the dream
> That He was thine and thou wast His
> Who feeds among the field-lilies.
> […]
> When thy Beloved at length renew'd

[68] 'Bridal Birth', *CW*, l.5-6, p.276.

The sweet communion severed, –
His left hand underneath thine head
And His right hand embracing thee?
Lo! He was thine, and this was He!

– Bridal Birth', *CW*, l.5-6, p.276.

In 'Ave', Dante Gabriel Rossetti reworks Bernard of Clairvaux's famous prayer to the Virgin Mary from the final canto of Dante's *Commedia*. Bernard, as depicted by Dante, presents the pilgrim to the Virgin as a humble suitor begging to partake in her grace, which ultimately enables the pilgrim to complete his journey and experience a personal and unencumbered vision of God:

"Virgin mother, daughter of your Son, humble
and exalted more than any other creature, fixed
term of eternal counsel:
you are she who ennobled human nature so
much that its Maker did not disdain to make
himself his own creature […]
[this man] supplicates you, of grace, for so much power
that he may lift his eyes up higher toward the
ultimate salvation […] " [69]

["Vergine madre, figlia del tuo Figlio,
umile e alta più che creatura,
termine fisso d'etterno consiglio:
tu se' colei che l'umana nature
nobilitasti sì che 'l suo Fattore
non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura […]
[questo uomo] supplica a te, per grazia, di virtute
tanto che possa con li occhi levarsi
più alto verso l'ultima salute. […]"]

In *Paradiso*, it is Bernard's pleas to the Virgin that makes mystical union with God possible for the pilgrim, through what Steven Botterill describes as a kind of visual rebirth because Mary is 'the channel of the grace that finally permits Dante to enjoy his ultimate vision'. [70] However, in 'Ave' Rossetti's speaker foregrounds the mystical union Mary experiences in conceiving Christ, and her reunion with God in the afterlife. He emphasizes Mary's espousal to the 'Holy Ghost', which Dante's Bernard somehow overlooks, in order to maximize her own divinity by drawing attention to

[69] *Paradiso*, 33.1-27, pp.660-1.
[70] Steven Botterill, 'Dante, Bernard, and the Virgin Mary', in *Dante and the mystical tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the Commedia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.153.

how she is intimately bound with *all* divine persons. Rossetti's speaker positions the Virgin as the cause from which all 'humanity' springs, and its effect, that is, the 'great Mystery' of the incarnation, and salvation. He implies that she is alpha and omega of all that once was and will be, the promise and its fulfilment, beginning and ending: 'That sweet communion severed', suggesting that in carrying Christ she achieved the ultimate mystical union with God possible for any mortal, and yet in birthing Him she cuts that connection. Hence, for Rossetti's speaker, the beloved reaches heights of which he cannot imagine in her spiritual experience of possessing and being possessed by God: 'Fashioned like us, yet more than we!'. Unlike Dante, Rossetti's praise of Mary dispenses with mediators and intercessors to divine vision and puts Bernard's mystical expression directly into the mouth of his speaker. In doing so, the speaker envisions Mary's status, as God's beloved, as the ultimate exemplar to which the lover must aspire.

Rossetti weaves allusions to the Song of Songs into his depiction of Mary's mystical relationship with God in order to emphasize its erotic dimension because the annunciation is likened to conjugal union between husband and wife: 'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies' and in death Mary is met by a sexually-charged divine embrace: 'His left hand is under my head and his right hand embraces me'. [71] Rossetti employs this erotic dynamic between 'Beloved' and lover, Bride and Bridegroom as an analogy for that of the human soul seeking mystical union with God. In doing so, he re-energies this well-worn story so that the salvation of mankind is articulated anew as the beloved's ultimate desire to be reunited with her lover, bride with her husband, and creation with its creator.

In Rossetti's poetry, I will argue, poetic devices reflect the cosmological, epistemological and theological preoccupations of Dante's *Paradiso* through a replication of the mysticism associated with Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard always had a soft spot for the *Song of Songs*, as Gilian R Evans highlights they provided him with comfort while he was convalescing from overwork early on in his monastic career. In 1135 he started writing a series of sermons that would he continue to work on until his death in 1153, entitled *Sermons on the Song of Songs*.[72] Over the course

[71] Song of Songs 6.3 and 2.6.
[72] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', BCSW, p.96.

of eighty-six sermons Bernard proposes a view of the biblical love song, between husband and wife, as an allegory for the love of God for his bride, the human soul. He argued that while the Song, at first sight, deals with the passion and word play between a man and wife on their wedding night, it truly sings 'the praises of Christ and his Church, the gift of holy love, the sacrament of endless union with God' and 'expresses the mounting desires of the soul, its marriage song, an exultation of the spirit poured forth in figurative language pregnant with delight'[73]. Hence, the 'bridegroom' comes to represent Christ and the 'bride' the human soul.

Yet, Bernard's unique contribution to religious commentaries on the Song lay in his insistence that the conjugal union of the bride and bridegroom offered the best analogy for expressing the human experience of the divine. For Bernard, there is no better language than that of 'marriage' to describe the essence, dynamism and bliss of the union between God and the soul:

> When she loves perfectly, the soul is wedded to the Word […] Truly this is a spiritual contract, a holy marriage. It is more than a contract, it is an embrace: an embrace where identity of will makes of two one spirit[74]

Bernard suggests that the mystical marriage between the bride (the human soul) and the Word (Christ) does not result in the obliteration of man, who is subsumed or overwhelmed by divine infinitude, rather results in the balancing of both in a spiritual 'embrace'. It is a divine encirclement in which the physical and spiritual desires of the human soul will find fulfilment and fresh inspiration moved by the oneness of his 'spirit' with God.

However, Bernard points out that this marital union is wholly distinct from the union between God and Christ because:

> since God and man do not share the same nature or substance, they cannot be a unity, yet they are with complete truth and accuracy said to be of one spirit, if they cohere with the bond of love. But that unity is caused not so much by the identity of essences as the concurrence of wills.[75]

[73] *OSOS*, I.8, (1971), p.5.
[74] *OSOS*, IV.83.3 (1980), p.182.
[75] *OSOS*, IV.71.7, (1980), p.54.

Bernard emphasizes that in mystical marriage neither party loses their individuality because God remains essentially dissimilar to man, so that they are bonded but separate entities. Moreover, he implies that mystical union describes a harmonious compromise in which man and God freely and tacitly choose or 'will' their coming together, in mutual love, to work to the same end. Discovering that their desires are complementary fulfils their deep-seated desire for the other and reinvigorates both, making them 'one spirit'. For Bernard, though this is an authentic marriage, it is not a marriage of equals because God instigates everything with the soul acquiescing 'wholly to grace, attributing to [God] both the beginning and the ending'[76] and recognising that 'he was her lover before he was her beloved'.[77]

Bernard did not hesitate in confronting the Song's most sensual of images, focusing eight of his sermons on a solitary verse: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth'[78]. Bernard argued that this was a strange way of expressing a simple endearment between husband and wife, noting that the beloved dares not ask directly for a simple kiss because what she is really asking for is 'the spiritual kiss of Christ's mouth'[79]. For Bernard, this indicated a crucial theological difference. It is only Christ as the 'kiss' who receives 'the kiss of his mouth', that is the Father's kiss, rendering the 'loving soul'[80] (represented by the Bride) at a remove from God 'kissed by the kiss'[81] that is Christ. Yet as Bernard points out, this distancing from the 'supreme kiss'[82] of God does not diminish the experience for the Bride because it demonstrates the mutual desire of man and God to have a 'share in that sweetness'[83]:

> This kiss is a joy, however, through which not only is God known, but the Father loved, who is never fully known unless he is loved […] For if carnal marriage makes two one flesh, why should not spiritual union make two one spirit?[84]

Furthermore, he articulates the desire for 'spiritual union' as an urgent physical need, a ravenous hunger, which once tasted cannot be satiated but only ever demands more:

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[76] *OSOS*, IV.67.10, (1980), p.14.
[77] *OSOS*,, II.45.8, (1976), p.232.
[78] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', *BCSW*, p.98
[79] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', *BCSW*, p.105.
[80] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', *BCSW*, p.114
[81] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', *BCSW*, p.121.
[82] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', *BCSW*, p.120.
[83] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', *BCSW*, p.97.
[84] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', *BCSW,* p.127

> God is sought not on foot, but by desire. And the happy discovery of what is desired does not end desire, but extends it. The consummation of joy does not consume desire, does it? Rather it is oil poured on flames, which itself catches fire. Thus it is. Joy will be fulfilled. But there will be no end to desire, and so no end of seeking. Put from your mind, if you can, the absence of God as the cause of this eagerness to seek him, for he is always present, and anxiety in the search, for you cannot fail to find his abundance. [85]

Bernard's theological outlook can operate as a critical lens through which we can examine Rossetti's treatment of how both the beloved and God come to represent the supreme beginning and ending of all desire, in a marriage of un-equals in which both parties are bound yet maintain their personal integrity. As Rossetti puts it (in a sonnet gifted to Jane Morris as part of the 'Kelmscott Love Sonnets' of 1871) 'Severed Selves', the lovers are 'Two separate divided silences'[86]: what is ineffable, yet a continual source of inspiration.

In Rossetti's 'The Kiss' (1870) a lady appears to his speaker, having prepared for what Bernard would call a 'holy marriage' because she mirrors the Bride from the Song of Songs:

> What smouldering senses in death's sick delay
> Or seizure of malign vicissitude
> Can rob this body of honour, or denude
> This soul of wedding raiment worn to-day?
> For lo! even now my lady's lips did play
> With these my lips such consonant interlude
> As laurelled Orpheus longed for who he wooed
> The half-drawn hungering face with that last lay.[87]

The speaker's vision of his lady recalls Rossetti's oil painting *The Beloved* (fig.15) alternatively titled 'The Bride') which vividly interprets the Bride from the Song of Songs and quotes directly both from the Song of Songs (1:2) and also from the Psalms (45:15) for its inscription:

[85] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', *BCSW,* p.128
[86] 'Severed Selves', *CW,* l.1, p.296.
[87] 'The Kiss', *CW*, l.1-8, p.278.

Fig. 15 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Beloved*, 1865-6. Tate Gallery, London.

> My Beloved is mine and I am his.
> Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth:
> for thy love is better than wine.
> She shall be brought unto the King
> in raiment of needlework: the virgins
> that be her fellows shall bear her
> company, and shall be brought unto thee.[88]

The speaker of 'The Kiss' asks what trappings of the flesh, or throes of time, that 'malign vicissitude', can dishonour his lady, whose 'soul' wears 'wedding-raiment', suggesting that she is ready to receive not just a conjugal union because her 'lips did play/With these my lips' but also 'the spiritual kiss of Christ's mouth'.[89] The speaker implies that not only is her 'soul' dressed for the occasion, but he as her lover insatiably desires her spiritual union with the bridegroom. It is a longing which Rossetti suggests in the image of 'smouldering senses' may have already been ignited yet still seethes (so that while the first flame of love may have gone its burn lingers).

[88] Ash, plate.19.
[89] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', *BCSW*, p.105.

The potential for the rekindling of an ever-present desire pervades *The House of Life*: in 'Love-Sweetness' the speaker recalls past amorous experiences with his beloved concluding that 'sweeter than these things'[90] is her limitless capacity to touch his 'spirit', revealing that what he really longs for is 'The confident heart's still fervour: the swift beat/ And soft subsidence of the spirit's wing/ Then when it feels, in cloud-girt wayfaring, The breath of kindred plumes against its feet?'[91] Here Rossetti conjures an image of the beloved's touch as that of an angel, ever-fervent and continually drawing him up through the heavens (recalling the teleporting eyes of Dante's Beatrice) until they are 'cloud-girt' in their 'wayfaring', suggesting that in pursuing his love for the beloved the speaker recreates Dante's journey to God which he feels as 'the breath' of the blessed propelling him upwards. In 'Heart's Compass' the speaker sees the beloved as beyond the alpha and omega of all desire:

> Sometimes thou seem'st not as thyself alone,
> But as the meaning of all things that are;
> A breathless wonder, shadowing forth afar
> Some heavenly solstice hushed and halcyon;
> Whose unstirred lips are music's visible tone;
> Whose eyes the sun-gate of the soul unbar,
> Being of its furthest fires oracular; -
> The evident heart of all life sown and mown.[92]

Rossetti's speaker plays on the dual meaning of 'breathless', depicting the beloved both as causing him,to lose his breath in the throes of passion (imitating her 'hushed' and reverential silence), and also as without breath herself, pure spirit, capable of transcending the natural boundary of the soul and emulating the Sun or God's light. Furthermore, in 'Soul-Light', Rossetti's speaker finds even after the 'fullness of all rapture, still… Far in your eyes a yet more hungering thrill, - /Such fire as Love's soul-winnowing hands distil/ Even from his inmost ark of light and dew'. The speaker looks to satisfy his unquenchable hunger once again not in the lusts of the flesh but through a touch of the ineffable, seeking to 'distil' the soul-wringing experience of Love through 'his inmost ark of light and dew', a rainbow, a visual bridge between the heavens and earth and ancient symbol for the covenant between God and man. Rossetti's speaker yearns for sensual-spiritual union with the divine, seeking

[90] 'Love-Sweetness', CW, l.9, p.286.
[91] 'Love-Sweetness', CW, l.11-14, p.286.
[92] 'Heart's Compass', CW, l.1-8, p.289.

satisfaction in the insatiable and finding in the 'eyes and voice' of his beloved that his ultimate desire is never satisfied but continually stoked because her 'soul doth move/ [His] soul with changeful light of infinite love'.[93] So even as the speaker struggles to overcome the physical world in order to articulate spiritual intimacy with God, he finds his language saturated with natural images: noon, 'startide' and dawn, rainbows and 'changeful light' that place him firmly on earth, subject to the passage of time and distanced from the heavens he tries to 'possess'.[94] Rossetti's insistence on presenting the speaker's desires solely through his experience of the world indicates his speaker's search for that most mystical experience, to encounter the divine *en via* (whilst living) rather than *en patria*, the eternal life to come. As the latter is beyond the direct experience of both the speaker and poet, Rossetti offers the reader glimpses (but never certainties) of the afterlife, alerting us to an experimental space made available only through the text in which we can participate in and view the dynamics of desire under controlled conditions. Thus, the reader can glimpse the sight of 'infinite love' and reflect on the implications of such mystical experience for our real lives.

Finally, despite its restriction to the speaker's experience *en via*, 'Soul-Light' nevertheless bears a striking resemblance to the Beatific Vision of Dante's pilgrim in *Paradiso*, who gazing into the face of God recounts:

> In the profound and clear Subsistance of
> deep Light I saw three circles, of three colors and
> of one circumference,
> and one seemed reflected from the other like a
> rainbow from a rainbow, and the third seemed
> fire breathing equally from both[95]
>
> [Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza
> de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri,
> di tre colori e d'una contenenza,
> e l'un da l'altro come iri da iri
> parea reflesso, e 'l terzo parea foco
> che quinci e quindi igualmente si spiri.]

[93] 'Soul-Light', l.2, p.290.
[94] 'Soul-Light', l.2, p.290.
[95] *Paradiso*, 33.115-20, pp.666-7.

Dante's use of the double rainbow indicates that God's promised alliance with man has been fulfilled and delivered through the three persons of the trinity, which the pilgrim discerns as three immaculate 'circles' all equal 'of one circumference' though separate persons 'of three colors'. The pilgrim sees the Word first because 'seemed reflected from the other' that is the Father, implying that the pact made between the Hebrew people and God has been upheld by the Incarnation – who symbolizes the reciprocated love, light and salvation of God. For Rossetti, 'his inmost ark' remains elusive, 'changeful' yet crucially directs the speaker to what he intuits must be out there, that is 'infinite love'.

It is this limitless desire that the speaker of 'The Kiss' fears the absolute loss of, which he alludes to through the myth of Orpheus. The speaker fears losing the feeling of musical and spiritual harmony represented by their 'consonant interlude' (which renders the sounds the lovers make in between kisses a musical composition) echoing 'that last lay' of Orpheus may like his beloved Eurydice become irretrievable. Hence, the speaker and his 'lady' might come to resemble the 'half-drawn' ancient lovers: merely 'longed for' and eternally 'hungering' without the possibility of fulfilment.

Moreover, in Christian terms Orpheus' turn back towards Hell comes to symbolize a fall into despair (away from the hope and promise of salvation of Paradise) so here Rossetti's speaker hints at the fear that love might blind him to earthly concerns rather than spiritual ones. Using the Orpheus myth, Rossetti dramatizes the alternative and tragic ending this sonnet could have had: mystical marriage cut short before the lady's untimely death and left unconsummated (leaving the speaker sexually and spiritually unsatisfied). However, in the second stanza, tragedy is safely averted with the moment sexual consummation arriving but also the revelation of the speaker's original desire for God:

> I was a child beneath her touch, – a man
> When breast to breast we clung, even I & she, –
> A spirit when her spirit looked through me, –
> A god when all our life-breath met to fan
> Our life-blood, till love's emulous ardours ran,
> Fire within fire, desire within deity.[96]

[96] 'The Kiss', *CW*, l.9-14, p.130.

Rossetti's speaker experiences a regression to infancy, reminiscent of the pilgrim in Dante's *Paradiso* (who with Bernard guiding his gaze towards the Beatific Vision of God) feels his speech retreating into the hushed silence of unknowing child: 'Henceforth my speech, will be briefer, even/ about what I remember, than that of a child that/ still bathes his tongue at the breast' ['Omai sarà più corta mia favela,/pur a quell ch' io ricordo, che d'un fante/ che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella'].[97] Both Rossetti and Dante suggest that when brought into divine embrace, their speakers find themselves not only brought back to a state of innocence or ignorance but are in a sense renewed, reinvigorated with youth – embodying the promise to start again, with optimism and unadulterated hope, the promise of a new life.

Furthermore, Rossetti, like Bernard of Clairvaux, articulates this encounter in both spiritual and sexual terms because his speaker only feels himself transcending his body as a 'spirit' when his beloved is looking at him and locked with him in sexual embrace. Moreover, Rossetti implies the union of their spirits becoming 'one spirit'[98] in the shift from his use of singular pronouns 'she' and 'I' to the collective 'our'. In his disembodied state his speaker echoes Bernard's account of the complete self-surrender of mystical love (only possible when man has reached the heights of spiritual growth):

> When shall my soul, drunk with divine love and forgetful of self […] rejoice wholly in God and, clinging to God, become one spirit with Him […] To lose yourself, as if you were no longer in existence, to feel yourself no more, emptied and almost obliterated, arises not from human love but is a conversion sent from heaven. [99]

Rossetti's speaker describes the climax of spiritual-sexual union as a partaking of divinity because he feels a sense of God-like omnipotence in which he experiences at once all the moments of his life and all the beating of his life-blood until he has a brief but almost ecstatic vision: 'Fire within fire, desire in deity'. This lasting image demonstrates how for Rossetti the beloved functions as the source and goal of all spiritual meaning; or as Bernard would put it 'the kiss, which is of both giver and receiver, is the Person who is of both, the Mediator between God and man' because it is only through her invitation and participation that he experiences spiritual

[97] *Paradiso*, 33.106-8, pp.664-5.
[98] *OSOS*, IV 83.3 (1980), p.182.
[99] Bernard of Clairvaux, *De diligendo Deo*, X.27; trans. my own.

communion with God and his basic desire for a 'share in that sweetness'.[100] In addition, this image suggests both enclosure and hierarchy in man's relationship with God, so that Rossetti's speaker envisions himself as being brought both into His loving embrace 'Fire within fire' and yet preserves the notion of man's subsidiary position to God with his desires subsumed into 'deity' that is in 'concurrence'[101] with God.

Rossetti's oil painting *The Beloved* (fig.15) not only demonstrates the inextricable link in Rossetti's artistic imagination between his figure of the beloved and Dante's Beatrice, but also the Bride from the Song of Solomon. This work was originally conceived in 1863 as a picture of Beatrice for Ellen Heaton, and Rossetti's letters give an insight into his dual interest in the aesthetics and theology of Dante because he started reimagining his Beatrice, early on, as the Bride from Solomon's Song, which he credits to the colouring of his model (Marie Ford):

> Do you know I am in somewhat of a dilemma with your picture […] it is certainly one of my best things, but the model does not turn out to be a perfect Beatrice, and at the same time I do not like to risk spoiling the colour by altering it from another model. I have got my model's bright complexion, which was irresistible, & Beatrice was pale […] I propose to find another subject to suit the figure – the Bride from Solomon's Song is specially in my head […] The present Beatrice must, I now find, be turned without remedy into Solomon's Bride, which however is a subject I myself delight in and have always had an eye to […] I will paint you a *Beatrice* instead whenever I can find a really suitable model. The only one I know now is Mrs. Morris [102]

Rossetti suggests that his model expresses an 'irresistible' quality that he proposes is better suited to the portrayal of the Bride, creating a dichotomy between a sexually assertive figure who 'I myself delight in and have always had an eye to' and the 'pale' figure of Beatrice: bloodless, ethereal and unobtainable. However, Rossetti implicitly undermines this through his insistence that the only 'really suitable' model for Beatrice would be one with whom he was having an illicit sexual relationship. Moreover, his composition of *The Beloved* recalls *The Blessed Damozel* (1875-8), *The Salutation of Beatrice* (fig.1) and *Dante's Dream* (1875) in which the central female figure is enclosed by attendants who replicate and offset her facial features – Rossetti may have wanted this painting, uniquely, to reflect the setting of a jewel yet as a pictorial device

[100] 'Sermons on the Song of Songs', *BCSW*, p.97.
[101] *OSOS*, IV.71.7 (1980), p.54.
[102] *Fredeman*, III.63.68 and 63.70, pp.61-3.

it is consistent with his Beatricean paintings. Furthermore, the irresistibility of the central figure seems to be a consequence of how Rossetti puts her on display, encased in swathes of fine and deep green fabric which the beloved pulls back in anticipation of receiving her bridegroom, rather than her actual expression which appears to be awed as much as it entices, distant yet intimate, erotic and enigmatic.

Hence, Rossetti's representation of the beloved in 'The Kiss' never definitively belongs to either of these types: the Bride or Beatrice, sexually forward or oblivious but is always located somewhere between the two. Thus, the endless 'desire and mystery'[103] of the beloved invigorates all Rossetti's female figures: Venus, Eve, Mary, the Bride and Beatrice.

Dante and Rossetti use Bernard of Clairvaux's mystical emphasis on reciprocity to depict either God or the beloved as the unsurpassable cause and aim of the individual soul's desire. In *Paradiso*, the pilgrim yearns for reciprocity from God – that is loving God and feeling that He loves man – whereas in Rossetti's works it is it reciprocity from the beloved who (like God) is essentially unknowable, mysterious and inaccessible that is the lover's ultimate desire. Yet, gaining mutual affection does not constitute the annihilation of desire but re-expresses it through the devotion to the beloved's or God's love, the pilgrim and lover assimilate themselves to her and His will, desires, plans or projects, so that desire is continually kindled and frustrated with a satisfaction that is guaranteed but indefinitely delayed.

Conclusion

Mark Wynn argues that the joy elicited by art brings about an emotional state that overwhelms our everyday experiences causing us to search beyond ourselves, he contends:

> This joy points towards God by training our attention away from the world, by moving us on from the affective condition that goes from immersion in the world – so providing a new, God-directed orientation. So that it points towards God, by turning the self's gaze from the world. [104]

[103] 'The Sea-Limits', *CW*, l.24, p.18.
[104] Mark Wynn, 'Representation in Art and Rellgion' in *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.174.

Both Dante's pilgrim and Rossetti's poetic speakers demonstrate that it is the 'joy' they find in Beatrice or the beloved that instructs them to look outside of themselves, beyond direct known human experience to the unknown, mysterious and inexplicable domain of the Other. This 'training' is inherently attractive because it offers a possibility of oneness, spiritual harmony and the fulfilment of man's most original desire, that is to love and feel loved by God, or as Rossetti puts it:

> To have loved and been beloved again
> Is the loftiest reach of Hope's bright wings[105]

Yet, as the mysticism of Bonaventure and Bernard of Clairvaux suggest, and Dante's representation of Paradise makes visible, the nature of this relationship is structured by the fundamental inequality between God and man. This renders the gaze between man and God as reciprocal and intimately related yet unequal because the dynamic of vision between God and His creation is like that of a two-way mirror: functioning as a panel of transparent glass (clear, undistorting and displaying things as they truly are) on the side of the Creator and on the side of creation acting as a mirror reflecting back to man his own image and limited world-view (obscuring, misrepresenting and projecting back man's limited understanding).

Hence, as all Rossetti's works and poetry recommend an acknowledgment of the spiritual within the physical, his subjects and speakers project this disparity and man's consequent feelings of inadequacy and anxiety unto man's relationship with man, the lover's relationship with the beloved and the known self's relationship with the unknown other. Thus, Rossetti renders desire, vision and representation as paradoxical, oscillating between appearance and reality and collapsing the distinctions between subject and object; lover, beloved and God; what is seen and unseen whilst highlighting an attraction towards the 'unimaginable'.[106]

[105] 'Soothsay', *CW*, l.20-1, p.382.
[106] 'Memorial Thresholds', *CW*, l.2, p.316.

Chapter Four.

Songs of Praise and Silence.

Doubt spoke no word in me as I kneeled.
  Loathing, I could not praise: I could not thank
  God for the cup of evil that I drank:
I dared not cry upon His strength to shield
My soul from weapons which it meant to wield
  Itself against itself. And so I sank
  Into the furnished phrases, smooth and blank
Which we all learn in childhood – and did yield
A barren prayer for life. My voice might mix
  With hers, but mingled not. Hers was a full
  Grand burst of music, which the crowned Seven
Must have leaned sideways from their seats to fix
  In their calm minds. The seraph-songs fell dull
    Doubtless, when heard again, throughout all heaven.

– 'Praise and Prayer', *WDGR*, p.266.

Rossetti first composed 'Praise and Prayer' in 1848 when he, William Michael and Christina set about practising their verse writing skills through bout-rimés sonnets – a literary contest in which one participant has to craft a sonnet in a few minutes using the rhyme scheme of another.[1] Given the time restrictions, it is perhaps little wonder that the focus of Rossetti's sonnet, amongst other things, was his speaker's struggle for articulation. Notably also, this particular sonnet was included the 1862 book of poems Rossetti famously buried in his wife's coffin, and then had exhumed.[2] 'Praise and Prayer', however, would remain unpublished until after his death and appears in print for the first time in William Michael's (1911) edition of Rossetti's complete works.[3] Crucially in this sonnet, Rossetti positions himself both as a participator in and interrogator of the Judeo-Christian tradition of praise, that is using language and music (especially the Psalms) to express one's admiration, and enjoyment of God as well as a physical vocalisation of the spiritual. Rossetti sets up a disparity between

[1] Robert N. Keane, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Poet as Craftsman* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2002), p.11. See also 'Bouts Rimés', *The Rossetti Archive*, ed. by Jerome McGann <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/42-1848.raw.html> [accessed 28 November 2019].
[2] Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Eng 769 < http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/23-1848.harvardms.radheader.html> [accessed 28 November 2019].
[3] *WDGR*, p.266.

the lover (poet) and beloved (subject), so that the former struggles to articulate the perfect praise, expression or harmony that the latter performs to God.

Rossetti's poetry, I shall argue in this chapter, expresses and views songs of praise in erotic terms as a deep-seated need to express, delight in and call out to what is ineffable, aloof and silent (God and the beloved) and interrogates the earthly mechanisms by which the believer does so (through song or music). In doing so, he depicts praise as paradoxical, oscillating between spirit and sense, contemplation and action, divine and human voice, speech and silence, and the soul and soulful music while indicating a drive towards harmony between the two.

Rossetti sets up his speaker of 'Praise and Prayer' so that Doubt clearly takes precedence over God as the centre of all meaning and value. However, it is this externalized force that is struck dumb in the face of the beloved's perfect praise. The speaker expects his own religious scepticism to raise, at least, an internal objection to his partaking in prayer to inspire perhaps an articulable apprehension, suspicion or questioning. Yet, his scepticism is nowhere to be heard, nor does it evoke any emotional expression from within: 'I could not praise: I could not thank'. Doubt inspires silence. Rossetti's use of a colon, between an expression of ingratitude 'I could not thank/ God for the cup of evil that I drank:' and self-harm ' I dared not cry upon His strength to shield/My soul from weapons which it meant to wield/ Itself against itself', represents a reduction of ideas, suggesting that his speaker's inability to praise *or* doubt comes down to a fundamental disharmony in the soul that seeks not to 'shield' but cannot help but 'wield/ Itself against itself'. Rossetti demonstrates linguistically how the speaker's instinct for self-preservation has been reversed, and his thinking has become insular, by the repetition of a series of reflexive pronouns that visually start and end the sentence, heightening the sense that psychologically the speaker is surrounded on all sides by 'weapons' of its own creation.

It is clear that the speaker of 'Praise and Prayer' recognizes the source of his inarticulacy as his lack of emotional reciprocity to God which becomes manifest in his impersonal, emotionless and spiritually void rendition of prayer that is charged only by a feeling of '[self]-loathing' or self-harm, which none can save him from because he feels disposed or 'bent' in that direction. Though Rossetti leaves 'His

strength' deliberately ambiguous (concurrently conveying an armour of both faith and doubt), without doubt he is left unprotected against the wordy 'weapons' of prayer that admonish his inability to commit one way or another to a belief in God. This leads to self-hate. However, what is important here is that Rossetti suggests that underpinning his speaker's despair is in fact a religious framework: he understands that his prayer should 'yield […] prayer for life', revealing (when stripped of faith or scepticism) his basic and inexorable impulse to affirm the sanctity of life.

'Praise and Prayer' is an important poem, then, because Rossetti dramatizes the difference between going through the motions (his speaker's soul-less prayer) and expressing a genuinely held religious conviction (the beloved's praise), by contrasting psychological disharmony with cosmic harmony, agitation with serenity, tedious with pleasing sound, sterility with fruitfulness and paralysis with motion. The speaker intuits he has resorted to imitating prayer: 'And so I sank/ Into the furnished phrases smooth and blank'. The feeling that he has 'sank' indicates a diminished capacity for faith, doubt or the salvation afforded through prayer, which rather than redeeming him, begins to damn the speaker as he fails to feel the uplifting effects of its meaning. Moreover, it indicates a loss of self, depicting a fall from grace or descent into the inarticulacy of Hell. Rossetti's suggestion that his speaker resorts to adopting the 'furnished phrases […] Which we all learn in childhood' implies that the words of worship are saturated in meaning (having already been embellished or filled out by someone else) and are complete enough in themselves to convey their sacred plea to God – hinting that their recitation only is enough to show and stir the speaker's belief. However, 'blank' suggests that these phrases need to be animated by religious conviction in order to bring them to life. This is because words are merely the device by which the speaker can express his personal religious sentiments and beliefs. Hence, as the speaker's 'smooth' intonation remains unwaveringly 'dull' this linguistic mechanism flatlines because he has only regurgitated the prayers he memorized in 'childhood', which yield no meaning for him. Rossetti presents his speaker regressing to a state of infancy, recalling the pilgrim in Dante's *Paradiso* who, looking into the face of God, feels his speech retreating into the hushed silence of the unknowing child: 'Henceforth my speech, will be briefer, even/ about what I remember, than that of a

child that/ still bathes his tongue at the breast'.[4] Dante suggests that when brought into communion with the divine the pilgrim finds himself brought back to an original state of innocence or ignorance in which he is renewed, reinvigorated with embodying the promise to start again, with optimism and unadulterated hope, the promise of a new life. In contrast, Rossetti asserts the emptiness of his speaker's uninspired religious utterance a 'barren prayer for life.' His expression is emotionally and musically sterile, unworthy of God's hearing, rendering present and future prayers ultimately fruitless. He neither expects God to hear him nor believes his prayer to be harmonious or sweet enough to stimulate religious emotions, or belief, making it utterly hopeless.

In 'Praise and Prayer', it is not through direct communion with God but only through the mediation of the beloved, whose authentic worship Rossetti juxtaposes against his speaker's half-hearted prayer, that the speaker can hear, identify and begin to participate in praise: 'My voice might mix/ With hers, but mingled not. Hers was a full/ Grand burst of music'. Rossetti emphasizes that, unlike the speaker's laboured 'barren prayer', the beloved's outpouring is emotionally and spiritually fecund and 'full, revealing a 'voice' that is both soulful and a devoted soul that is worthy of God's hearing. The speaker makes her inner harmony audible and bodily because he associates his own absence of spiritual feeling with the lacklustre spoken prayer that has failed him. Rossetti highlights that his speaker has an aesthetic appreciation of her real emotional expression and belief, even if he cannot yet emulate it himself, because he discerns in her song a beauty, rapture, and divinity that elevates her voice, for him, above the angels 'seraph-songs' – so awesome, grand and harmonious is her praise. Rossetti intimates that if his speaker's voice fused with hers and was full of her religious fervour, requiring them to be physically, sensually and sonorously unified – and hinting at sexual union – he would be able to commune not just with God but find a new way to reach 'heaven' which he envisions is filled with her song and beauty. Moreover, the speaker attributes a sense of transcendence and totality to her song because he imagines that all of heavenly creation is transfixed by her music: 'the crowned Seven/ Must have leaned sideways from their seats to fix/ In their calm minds'. The speaker envisions the 'crowned Seven', which represent the seven

[4] *Paradiso*, 33.106-8, p.665

angelic 'Lamps of Fire' that burn before God's throne[5], straining to hear and get closer to the beloved's impassioned song – a music more harmonious, euphonic and infinitely moving than the comparatively 'dull' angelic music, which is demoted to a class of inferior music and is left awe-struck and silent in her presence.

As such Rossetti conveys that the beloved is not only the ideal muse, musician and believer, but also a kind of prophet who inspired by Love is able to communicate His message. This is because she has the gift of a supreme composer, using the timbre of her voice to prescribe the right kind of emotional attitude in the listener inclining them, to a heightened awareness of the sentiments associated with religious belief: love, awe, grandeur and totality. Thus, Rossetti demonstrates how the speaker is ultimately only able to praise God – or find the right kind of language or poetic music to do so – by praising the beloved. This is a significant and recurring pattern, I will argue, across much of Rossetti's poetry.

Such emotionally-charged expression reflects the ardour, reverence and desire to be heard and answered that marks the lover's desire for the beloved, man's desire for God and the self's desire for the other, yet collapses the distinction between language used to praise the beloved, God and other. Rossetti's poetry can be seen as in dialogue with a long-established tradition of performing and problematizing praise from Augustine through Dante to Newman. In Augustine's *Confessions* (which Rossetti read and enjoyed) he uses a language of praise that is suffused with allusions to Psalms, an exegetical practice I will trace to John Henry Newman, and some of Rossetti's poetry. Moreover, I examine Augustine's conflicting opinions about the moral value of singing in church, viewing it on the one hand as a potential indulgence in sensuality and on the other as offering spiritual benefits to the hearer. This paradox, I propose, informs Dante's thoughts on the moral value of singing because Canto II of his *Purgatorio* (the focus for the latter third of this chapter) juxtaposes the performance of profane and sacred music. Rossetti, I argue, then attempts to bring to light the inextricable link between sacred and profane music, by presenting lyrical expression as a fusion of sensuality and spirituality in our relations with God and others. As we

[5] 'Praise and Prayer Annotations', The Rossetti Archive, ed. by Jerome McGann, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/23-1848.raw.html> [accessed 4 October 2019]. See also Revelation 4.5.

will see, for Dante and Rossetti, praise enables them to navigate the distance between one person and another (lover and beloved) and man and God.

Theological Origins

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Psalms were used in communal worship as songs set to music for the purposes of thanksgiving, lament, and of praising God. The process of adopting and adapting the style, form and content of the psalter to suit new ideologies, theological convictions or socio-historical contexts is not new in Christian theology, scripture or art. Much of the New Testament cites and views the Psalms as prophesies fulfilled by the arrival of Jesus[6], either casting David as a prophet who foresaw Jesus' actions or sayings or conflating the voice of the psalmist (David) altogether with that of Jesus himself. The Gospel authors often assimilated the language of the psalms into Christ's guidance and speech; perhaps the most famous example is how Christ's pronouncement 'Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth'[7] modifies the psalmist's assurances 'But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace' and 'The righteous shall inherit the land and dwell therein for ever'.[8]

This relatively free interpretative tradition was maintained by consecutive Christian exegetes. Augustine's allegorical reading of the Psalms conceptualized them as mainly anticipating the events in the life and death of Christ. Augustine opens his *Confessions* with a direct quotation: '*Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty? How magnificent his strength! How inscrutable his wisdom*!',[9] He does so in order to establish that the desire to praise God has always been inherent in mankind because '[man] cannot be content unless he praises [God]'.[10] Throughout, he methodically and repeatedly interweaves allusions to the psalms alongside his autobiographical account

[6] According to Luke 24:44, Jesus heralds himself as the Messiah as foretold in 'the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms'.
[7] Matthew 5.5.
[8] Psalms 37.11 and 37:.9. Compare also Matthew 6.26 and Psalm 147.9, Matthew 21.9 and Mark 11.9 with Psalm 118.26 etc. *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms* ed. by William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), pp.6-7.
[9] Psalm 145.3. Augustine, *Confessions* trans. by R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 2002), I, p.21. Italics are editor's indicating biblical allusions, unless otherwise stated.
[10] *Confessions*, I, p.21.

of his conversion to Christianity. Augustine describes his experience of reading the psalms as a decisive moment in the history of his spiritual development:

> How I cried out to you, my God, when I read the Psalms of David, those hymns of faith, those songs of a pious heart […] I was new to your true love […] How I cried out to you when I read those Psalms! How they set me on fire with love of you! I was burning to echo them to all the world, if only I could, so that they might vanquish man's pride. And indeed they are sung throughout the world and just as none can hide away from the sun *none can escape your burning heat*.[11]

For Augustine, encountering the Psalms triggers within him a moment of private emotional clarity in which he cries out to God in his own personal speech, seeking to commune with Him, yet could locate no 'true[r]' speech than that of the ancient, communal 'hymns of faith' of the psalms with which to express his new devotion. Reading the Psalms, he tells us, set Augustine on 'fire', suggesting both divine illumination and erotic passion, inflaming and rechanneling his desire to exalt God not for his own sake but to all who would listen – to declare the glory of God to the 'world' through the most fitting language of praise – only to be comforted by the revelation of their universal significance being 'sung throughout the world'. For Augustine, the language of the Psalms is best language to adore God. He alludes to Psalm 19 in which the psalmist depicts the heavens proclaiming the glory of God: 'His going forth is from the end of heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof'. In short, one of the main narrative modes of the *Confessions* is of the believer *singing* to God.

Brian Stock has argued that Augustine's employment of the Psalms is paramount to his project to refocus 'the ethical direction of his conduct' and while working 'toward this objective, words, phrases, and verses from the Psalms are reinterpreted within the narrative of the life that he intends to live'.[12] As Susan Gillingham points out in *Psalms Through the Centuries* the Psalms became an inspiring resource for the Tractarians, who viewed the writings of early Church Fathers such as Augustine as

[11] *Confessions*, IX.4.27, p.186. Psalm 19:6.
[12] Brian Stock, 'Confessions 1-9', in *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p.114.

authoritative on matters of Christian teachings and practice.[13] Newman, in particular, wrote several papers on psalmody:

> [Newman's] work on the psalms have two recurrent themes: the primacy of singing psalms and canticles in church liturgy, and the need for the contemporary renderings of the early Latin and Greek hymnody of the early church […] Newman's reverence for the early church fathers meant that in his papers and sermons he applied the same typological (although not usually allegorical) ways of reading the psalms as they too had done. For example, a sermon preached in 1840 unashamedly takes a Christological reading of many of the psalms, seeing David as a type of Christ […] they 'breathe of Christ'.[14]

Rossetti, like Newman, had read and critically engaged with Augustine's *Confessions*. Although Newman was 'enamoured' by Augustine's words, Rossetti's response to reading *Confessions* was rather more mixed. He describes it alternately as 'a delightful book'[15] but also as a conduct book containing only a theory of 'self-appeasement'.[16] As I discuss in Chapter One, this curious criticism of the *Confessions* targets Augustine for not being moral enough – or at least not providing the reader with a set of moral directives by which to obtain conversion. Yet, this does not lead Rossetti to abandon either Augustine's confessional mode or the tensions he sets up between sacred and profane music (which I will outline more fully in the next section) rather Rossetti's poetry sets out to resolve these anxieties. Thus, Augustine's approach may provide a conceptual framework through which to view Rossetti's paradoxical relationship with praise.

Rossetti also, significantly, receives this Augustinian tradition from his reading of Dante's *Commedia*. Augustine may not receive the same fanfare as Bonaventure or Bernard of Clairvaux whose roles in Dante-pilgrim's journey are more substantive – he is only mentioned twice in *Paradiso* first named to identify Orosius[17], and then in Canto XXXII Bernard describes Augustine heavenly position in the Celestial Rose beneath John the Baptist.[18] However, as John Freccero argues the *Confessions* is the central text of Dante's *Commedia* because

> If point of departure [the dark wood], as well as the goal [divine illumination], of Dante's spiritual itinerary deliberately recalls the experience of Augustine

[13] Susan Gillingham, 'Devotional Works', in *Psalms Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p.211.
[14] Susan Gilingham, p.211.
[15] *Fredeman*, II.53.23, p.246.
[16] *FLM*, pp.417-8. See also *Fredeman*, II.53.29, p.256.
[17] *Paradiso* 10.118-20, pp.212-3.
[18] *Paradiso* 32.35, pp.640-1.

> in the *Confessions*, then it may be that we are to regard Dante's entire spiritual autobiography as essentially Augustinian in structure.[19]

Augustine's influence on Dante's Commedia has been well documented, for instance Francis X. Newman and Marguerite Mills Chiarenza have investigated the dynamic between the three kinds of vision in Augustine's *De genesi ad litteram* and the structure and aesthetics of the *Commedia*.[20] Indeed, Peter S. Hawkins insists that the separation of the *Commedia* from Augustine's thought would 'inconceivable'.[21]

Rossetti's works, I argue, engage at one level with this long-standing Christian tradition of praise, by interpreting the psalms to illuminate new theological ideas, specifically his aim to spiritualize the emotional life, sanctifying his speakers' adoration of the beloved as something spiritual, ethical and moral (elevating earthly love to the same status as God's love) and uncovering the sensuality involved in the act of praising God. Following his reading of Augustine and Dante, Rossetti appropriates and modifies the voice of the Psalter in his speakers' expressions of praise in order to reorient an allegorical, Christological interpretation of the Psalms towards the beloved, that is viewing the Psalms mainly in relationship to how the beloved impacts the emotional life of the speaker, unveiling her as the site of perfect earthly praise (that the poet may struggle to imitate) and revealing the language used to praise God is indistinguishable from that of adoring the beloved. In 'Ave', Rossetti's speaker praises the Virgin Mary, by proclaiming her as the New Eve who by bearing the saviour of mankind redeems Eve's disobedience to God and in so doing embodies within herself the trinitarian divinity of God. The speaker imagines the Virgin:

> Mother of the Fair Delight,
> Thou handmaid perfect in God's sight,
> Now sitting fourth beside the Three,
> Thyself a woman-Trinity,—
> Being a daughter borne to God,
> Mother of Christ from stall to rood,
> And wife unto the Holy Ghost:—
> Oh when our need is uttermost,
> Think that to such as death may strike

[19] John Freccero, *The Poetics of Conversion*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p.1-2.
[20] See Francis X. Newman, 'St Augustine's Three Visions and the Structure of the Commedia', *MLN*, 82 (1967), 56-78 and Marguerite Mills Chiarenza 'The Imageless Vision and Dante's Paradiso', *Dante Studies* 90 (1972), 77-92.
[21] Peter S. Hawkin, 'Augustine, St.' in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, p.71. See also Hawkins, 'Divide and Conquer: Augustine in the Divine Comedy', *PMLA* 106.3 (1991), 471-482.

Thou once wert sister sisterlike!
Thou headstone of humanity,
Groundstone of the great Mystery,
Fashioned like us, yet more than we!

Rossetti's speaker recasts Bernard's prayer to the Virgin in Canto XXXIII of Dante's *Paradiso*[22] , in which Bernard seeks her permission (as both the mother and daughter of Christ) to allow the pilgrim to advance on his journey and have an unencumbered view of God. In Rossetti's version he stresses that she is also wife to the Holy Ghost, which Bernard somehow seems to overlook, in order to maximize her divinity by drawing attention to how she is intimately bound with *all* divine persons. However, Rossetti's speaker is also recasting Psalm 118 – in 'Thou headstone of humanity,/ Groundstone of the great Mystery' – in which the psalmist gives thanks to God for his impending salvation:

I will praise thee: for thou hast heard me, and art become my salvation.
The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner[23]

Matthew, Mark and Luke all recount that Jesus used this Psalm to remind his followers that the nation or people who were once dismissed or neglected on earth will be granted the kingdom of Heaven and eternal salvation, suggesting that the psalm heralds him as mankind's saviour.[24] However, Rossetti's speaker also positions the Virgin as the cause from which all humanity springs: its effect is the 'great Mystery' of the incarnation and salvation, implying that she is alpha and omega of all that once was and will be, the promise and its fulfilment, beginning and ending. 'That sweet communion severed' suggests that in carrying Christ she achieved the ultimate mystical union with God possible for any mortal - and yet that in birthing Him she cuts that connection. Hence, for Rossetti's speaker the beloved reaches heights of which he cannot imagine in her spiritual experience of possessing and being possessed by God: 'Fashioned like us, yet more than we!'.

In 'Supreme Surrender' (1869), a sonnet Rossetti composed under working title 'Sovereign Service' which suggests a communal act of spiritual worship as well as

[22] *Paradiso*, 33.1-3: 'Virgin mother, daughter of your Son, humble/ and exalted more than any other creature, fixed/ term of eternal counsel'.
[23] Psalm 118.21-2.
[24] Matthew 21.42, Mark 12.10, Luke 20.17.

sexual supplication, Rossetti's speaker encounters the beloved in a dream-vision, picking her out amidst a plethora of spirits, and observing:

> To all the spirits of Love that wander by
> Along his love-sown harvest-field of sleep
> My lady lies apparent; and the deep
> Calls to the deep; and no man sees but I.
> The bliss so long afar, at length so nigh,
> Rests there attained. Methinks proud Love must weep
> When Fate's control doth from his harvest reap
> The sacred hour for which the years did sigh. [25]

Rossetti suggests that the speaker's imagination is saturated with images of lost loves, potential loves that have not yet arrived, and the pursuit of love which invigorates his 'sleep' or psyche at play. The speaker alone is able to discern the beloved's singular spiritual significance because he addresses her with homage and devotion of a pilgrim: 'My lady' (perhaps bringing to mind a title usually afforded to the Virgin Mary 'Our Lady)' and hears in response 'the deep/ Calls to the deep; and no man sees but I'. Rossetti here directly cites Psalm 42, in which the singer yearns for God's presence and is troubled by his absence, singing:

> My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear to God? […] Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me[26]

The psalmist's longing for God is both sensual and spiritual, depicting 'the living God' as an embodied being that can satisfy not only the soul's desire for nourishment, blessings or vitality but a bodily thirst that is only quenched by evidence of God's superabundance in the world. Thus, the psalmist feels subsumed by God's overflowing love in an act of sexual and spiritual surrender.

Likewise, the speaker, absent from his beloved, feels 'the longing ache' for her touch, attained through her answer to his soul's call – the deep to the deep – awarding him not only spiritual bliss but the 'sacred hour for which the years did sigh'; suggesting both the momentary gratification of orgasm, but also an enduring mystical experience of communing with the divine. Moreover, the speaker describes the luxuriance of

[25] 'Supreme Surrender', *CW*, ll.1-8, p.279.
[26] Psalm 42.2-7.

sexual encounter as a kind of superabundance; her 'abandoned hair doth flow' and both their hearts tremble in 'sovereign overthrow', implying both a sensual overload and the transcendence of all bodily experience.

Rossetti's speaker thus offers his beloved as the answer to the psalmist's implicit question 'Where is God?', by revealing how the spiritual-sexual desire for both God and for the beloved are the same, but also how the language used to praise God becomes indistinguishable from the language of praising the beloved.

Furthermore, Rossetti draws an association between the act of praising and man's spiritual just deserts through a metaphor of harvest, invoking the famous New Testament warning 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap'.[27] This echo suggests that the speaker is only able to experience and articulate moments of such deep fulfillment (at once 'so long afar, at length so nigh') through poetic composition, just as the psalmist does while singing. This is because it is only through the exercise of the imagination, the 'love-sown harvest-field of sleep' that 'memory' no longer 'mock[s] desire' and the speaker can capture his moment of 'bliss' and make it everlasting.

Rossetti intimates a call and response form of psalmody, in which a refrain is alternately sung by men and women in a church choir, in his 1871 sonnet 'Youth's Antiphony'.[28] These refrains initially take the form of lovers' praise for each other:

> "I love you, sweet: how can you ever learn
> How much I love you?" "You I love even so,
> And so I learn it." "Sweet, you cannot know
> How fair you are." "If fair enough to earn
> Your love, so much is all my love's concern."
> "My love grows hourly, sweet." "Mine too doth grow,
> Yet love seemed full so many hours ago!"
> Thus lovers speak, till kisses claim their turn.[29]

However, in the sestet, Rossetti's speaker observes that it is only by praising the beloved that the sweet sound of Love's eternal song can be heard:

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[27] Galatians 6.7.
[28] Edward Foley et al. (eds), 'Antiphon', in *Worship Music: A Concise Dictionary*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000), pp.17-8.
[29] 'Youth's Antiphony', *CW*, ll.1-8, p.282.

Hour after Hour, remote from the world's throng,
Work, contest, fame, all life's confederate pleas, –
What while Love breathed in sighs and silences
Through two blent souls one rapturous undersong.[30]

Rossetti seems here to recall Psalm 83, in which the speaker urges God not to be silent but to take action against those who would work against the unity of the nation because God's enemies 'have consulted together with one consent: they are confederate against thee'.[31] In an uncannily similar way, Rossetti's speaker imagines the conflicting demands of work, contest, and fame as conspirators against his spiritual and sexual communion with the beloved. It is only away from the din of earthly life that the spirit of Love operates, and is made audible through the lovers in, significantly, 'sighs and silences' – both breathlessness in sexual embrace, and the quiet and meditative 'silence' of spiritual union. Though the lovers' mystical union renders them both without breath, pure spirit, 'two blent souls', unified yet distinct they produce an ecstatic rhapsody that, while described as occurring, remains unheard by the reader – an experience that is both visceral yet disembodying, expressive yet ineffable, momentary yet lasting. Hence, Rossetti suggests that it is only through the act of poetic composition, or praising the beloved, that the concurrent sound and silence, the peculiar combination of transience and permanence of such mystical experience can be captured, and by creating something new freeze the moment in time.

Rossetti also reproduces devotional singing in his 1869 poem 'Love's Nocturn' (1869) (which as I highlight in Chapter One imagines the beloved as Saviour) whose title alludes, liturgically, to a night-time prayer that would have originally included reciting the psalms, praying and prostrating oneself before God.[32] In the poem, Rossetti's speaker addresses his praise to the force that animates his dreams, his slumbering psyche and the life of his imagination – Love itself who is – the 'Master of the murmuring courts/Where the shapes of sleep convene!'.[33] It is Love that moves the speaker's poetic composition, Love whom he calls upon to cast his 'shade'[34] or spirit to sing to his beloved in hopes that they may love in waking life and Love who renders all articulation possible by lending order, meaning and structure to the speaker's

[30] 'Youth's Antiphony', *CW*, ll.11-14, p.282.
[31] Psalm 83.5.
[32] Foley, 'Matins', p.193.
[33] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, l.1-2, p.227.
[34] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, l.54, p.228.

seemingly disparate, intangible and dizzying sequence of dream-visions. By the end of the poem, the speaker moves away from the inarticulate, indistinct and primal moan[s], murmuring and whispering of his dreaming psyche, and offers up 'speech, song, prayer' to 'end aright'.[35]

Rossetti uses his speaker's final prayer to demonstrate how Love brings balance and harmony to the speaker's psyche (giving him a renewed sense of self-knowledge) and his poetic compositions, which come to express a harmonious blend of lovesong and Psalm. His speaker exclaims:

> Yea, to Love himself is pour'd
> This frail song of hope and fear
> Thou art Love, of one accord
> With kind Sleep to bring her near,
> Still-eyed, deep-eyed, ah how dear!
> In her name implor'd, O hear![36]

The speaker is able to discern clearly that what drives his need for poetic self-expression or 'frail song' is the desire for unification in love, but also the anxiety of a psyche without love: he therefore suggests that Love and Sleep are 'of one accord', the one complementing the other. It is only when he recognizes this that his beloved's visage appears before him 'Still-eyed, deep-eyed': a brief glimpse of the speaker's dream vision of her, in which her eyes are fixed, perpetually profound and unfathomable like a picture. Moreover, Rossetti's speaker recalls Psalm 142 and 143, in which David prays for shelter from his persecutors:

> I cried unto the Lord with my voice; with my voice unto the Lord did I make my supplication. I poured out my complaint before him; I shewed before him my trouble […] Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to my supplications: in thy faithfulness answer me, and in thy righteousness.[37]

Just as David 'poured out' his distress and desire for God to remedy his suffering into these Psalms, Rossetti's speaker 'pour'd' his hopes and fears for reunion with his beloved into his 'frail song' addressed to 'Love himself'. Rossetti's speaker self-consciously suggests that while his expression of praise will always fall short, he hopes

[35] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, l.112, p.230.
[36] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, ll.148-154, p.231.
[37] Psalms 142.1-2, 143.1.

nonetheless that his beloved will 'hear' and implicitly 'answer' his plea, reverentially invoking 'her name' as the supreme source and aim of his imaginative, sensual and spiritual life. Hence, Rossetti suggests that it is only through Love, who seems increasingly to resemble an agent of the beloved's salvific power, that all psychological, linguistic and cosmic order and harmony can be received by the speaker.

Music & Lyrics

Rossetti's poetry demonstrates an alertness to the relationship between psychological and musical harmony, so that the beloved (who is presented in perfect harmony with all creation and God) is continually juxtaposed with the lover who struggles to harmonize with her. Rossetti epitomizes his speaker's struggle in 'True Woman. III. Her Heaven' (1880):

> True Woman, she whom these weak notes have sung.
> Here and hereafter – choir-strains of her tongue, –
> Sky-spaces of her eyes, – sweet signs that flee
> About her soul's immediate sanctuary, –
> Were Paradise all uttermost worlds among.

Rossetti's speaker self-consciously criticizes his praise of the beloved, his poetic 'weak notes', which he sees as paling in comparison before the 'choir-strains of her tongue' implying that her voice contains within it dulcet tones a harmonized group of singers taking part in a church service. His praise of the beloved is an imperfect reflection of her praise to God, suggesting a musical gulf between lovers that is heightened in the afterlife, in which the beloved's song finds its true accord in Paradise with the music of the spheres.

Using musical harmony as a metaphor to convey the transporting and emotive resonances of religious belief or way of explaining the operation of the human mind or cosmos is not new in theology, art or scripture. For instance, when psalms are performed in song and set to instrumental accompaniment, they require an external, musical harmony that imitates and makes audible their internal completeness and eternal Truth.

For Augustine, the recitation of the psalms demonstrates the internal harmony, order and sweetness (musicality) of its speech, reflects the tranquillity of the speaker's 'pious' soul and the correct ordering of the universe. This is because, according to Augustine, the psalmic texts are complete in themselves, at once heralding and becoming the words of the Messiah, articulating man's desire to call out to God and satisfying that desire by offering an expression of praise and presenting the Word (or Christ) as the only medium to understand the truth of God.[38] As Rowan Williams has argued 'the psalms represent the unifying of the divine and human voice in Christ […] who reveals the entire created universe as a "sign of God"'.[39] However, Augustine in his exposition on Psalm 42 also professes that while in life what a man hears, understands or knows of God will be proportionate to his own internal equilibrium or '"faith" in Abraham's bosom'.[40] This notion that cosmic or spiritual knowledge is in some sense proportional to the strength of one's faith, psyche or goodness has roots in Ancient Greek philosophy, specifically the association between higher spiritual insight as granting access to higher kinds of music. As such the lineage of this association (in Pythagorus, Plato and their interpreter for the medieval tradition Boethius) deserves attention, before tracing its development in Dante's *Commedia* and Rossetti's poetry, because it is integral to the theological traditions that inform Dante's metaphysics.

The association of musical harmony with the transporting, transforming and emotive resonances of some higher, profound and unspeakable truth, a well-tempered psyche and the ordered workings of the cosmos is well-established trope from Pythagorean musical theory, which viewed an ordered universe and an ordered psyche as the result of celestial bodies and their movement being in accord with geometric ratio, proportion and harmony. Pythagoras claimed that given the size of celestial bodies their motion must produce an immense volume of sound and that their speed in relation to their distances are equivalent to musical ratios for the octave.[41] Hence, the long standing connection between the music of the spheres and the playing of stringed instruments (especially the harp, or lyre as exemplified by harp playing psalm-writer

[38] Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 27.
[39] Williams, p. 27.
[40] Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, trans. by members of the English Church (Oxford: John Henry Parker; London: F. and J. Rivington, 1848) II, p.206.
[41] Henry Chadwick, 'Music', in *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981), p.79.

King David[42]) comes about from the discovery of musical ratios (attributed to Pythagoras by Boethius and others[43]) whose performance comes to represent the spiritual life, the power of grace, heavenly music and the internal harmony of the spirit.

Boethius's *De institutione musica* elucidated, for the clerics of the Middle Ages, ancient Greek musical theory. Boethius' work set forth Pythagorus' unification of arithmetic and music and Plato's understanding of the relationship between music and society, and was the main text through which these theories reached the medieval manuscript tradition. In Plato's *Timaeus*, he uses Pythagorean ratio-theory to argue that there must be a sovereign Intellect or 'World-Soul'[44] governing the universe, who presides over a mathematically crafted and therefore musically harmonious cosmos. This Intellect represents a macrocosm for the human soul, which, because it consists of the elements that make up the universe, must also operate according to the mathematical and musical ratios for the octave that rule all. Yet, unlike the Creator, human beings have lost their harmony (due to their embodiment) and so must strive to attune themselves to harmony of the cosmos through study of the universe and its melody.[45]

Boethius argued that there is an inextricable link between man's innate capacity to make music, the presence of music in the cosmos (an idea which was then thought obvious) and man's intrinsic desire for what is harmonious:

> What Plato rightfully said can likewise be understood: the soul of the universe was joined together according to musical concord within us. For when we hear what is properly and harmoniously united in sound in conjunction with that which is harmoniously coupled and joined together within us and are attracted to it, then we recognise that we ourselves are put together in its likeness. For likeness attracts, whereas unlikeness disgusts and repels.[46]

For Boethius, this connection is powered by similarity: because harmony is the basic law of the cosmos therefore mankind's true nature must be similar to the rest of

[42] Foley, 'Temple, music of the', p.298.
[43] Neil Bibby, 'Tuning and temperament: Closing the Spiral', in *Music and Mathematics: From Pythagorus to Fractals*, ed. by John Fauvel et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp.12-3.
[44] Ian Leask, 'Performing Cosmic Music: Notes on Plato's Timaeus' in *Religion, Education, and the Arts*, Issue 10: 'Sacred Music: Perspectives on Performance', 2016.
[45] Leask, 2016.
[46] As quoted in Ferdia Stone-Davies, *Musical Beauty: Negotiating the Boundary between Subject and Object* (Eugene, OR: Casade Books, 2011), p.16-7. See Plato *Timaeus* 35b and Boethius *Fundamentals of Music* 1.1.180.

creation (sharing in its music-making abilities) and want to be that which it is similar to (desiring harmony) that is essentially ordered and concordant. Moreover, he suggests that only those who are perfectly balanced in mind and body can hear and understand the harmonious workings of the cosmos, gain self-knowledge and realize our essential drive towards 'concord', order and harmony.

Music, then, holds a number of unique psychological, metaphysical and ethical attributes because it can affect the emotional balance of the soul, move the individual to virtuous behaviour, make the geometrical arrangement of the universe audible and draw attention to the perfection of its immutable Creator.

Boethius's distinction between three kinds of music and his emphasis on the harmony within this hierarchy influenced Dante: the highest order of music was *musica mundana* (cosmic music or the eternal music of the spheres representing the proportion of the planets, stars, four elements and seasons), followed by *musica humana* (human music signifying the perfect balance of soul and body in human nature) and *musica instrumentalis* (instrumental music including all natural sound produced by the human voice and artificial sound generated by string, wind and percussive instruments). [47] Augustine in his exposition on Psalm 42 describes hearing something similar to Boethius' *musica mundane* at the point of death, suggesting that the mind on departure from the world hears a sublime and superior 'intellectual music'[48]:

> For a certain sound from above so strikes in silence, not on the ears but on the mind, that whosoever hears that melody is filled with loathing of corporeal sounds, and the whole of this human life is to it but a kind of din, interrupting the hearing of a certain strain from above, passing sweet, incomparable, and ineffable. [49]

For Augustine, all harmonious music orients the listener towards the divine, yet the eternal music of the spheres represents the most direct line to understanding God's perfect creation because it is only when one is stripped of all imperfection, one's fleshly trappings, that they can hear its unadulterated melody. Hearing such purely abstract and rational music renders all other sound intolerable, triggering in the listener

[47] Lansing, 'Music' in *Dante Encyclopaedia*, p.631
[48] Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, II, p.206.
[49] Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, II, p.206.

a repulsion from 'corporeal sounds' that begin to resemble a resounding and incoherent din. In essence, it reveals such sounds' essential disharmony, and how they impede the 'hearing of a certain strain from above' that is the infinite music of the spheres. Yet, Augustine demonstrates how, even to the refined judgement, eternal music will always evade and transcend human comprehension because it remains 'passing sweet, incomparable, and ineffable'. The listener may only hear its glorious harmony in snippets, a brief and transient note of the infinite, unsurpassable and indescribable.

Both Augustine and Boethius, view the different categories of music within a hierarchy, viewing 'intellectual music' or *music mundane* as the highest order and corresponding to the higher level of spiritual achievement one can attain, while 'corporeal sounds' or *musica instrumentalis* corresponds to our imperfect earthly melodies. Dante externalizes this musical and spiritual hierarchy in the structure of his *Commedia*. In *Inferno* the pilgrim is bombarded with incomprehensible mutterings, depicting the movement from the first to the second circle as an ever-tightening echo chamber, in which primitive noises of suffering reverberate, are amplified, and become embodied in images of suffocation. Dante inundates the pilgrim with primal expressions that close in around him. He senses the space grow smaller with the promise of 'more suffering'[50] ['tanto più dolor'] audible in the incoherent 'shrieks'[51] ['strida'] of tortured souls ,'grief-stricken notes'[52] ['dolenti note'], 'weeping'[53] ['pianto'], 'wailing' ['il compianto'], 'lamenting' ['il lamento'], 'curs[ing] God's power' ['besemmian quivi la virtù divina'].[54] The pilgrim is made to hear how the individual voices of those once made notorious by history have degenerated into the babbling of a homogenized chorus[55], so that even as Virgil names specific sinners, they remain an undifferentiated strain, abridged to merely uttering seemingly unintelligible cries. It is a sort of anti-music of the spheres that is distinct from the din of earthly life, because the latter includes *musica instrumentalis* (the inferior music of human voice and instruments used in praising) in which we get moments of beauty, articulation, and harmonious expression that may not represent

[50] *Inferno*, 5.3, pp.86-7.
[51] *Inferno*, 5.35, pp.88-9.
[52] *Inferno*, 5.25, pp.86-7.
[53] *Inferno*, 5.27, pp.86-7.
[54] *Inferno*, 5.35, p.88-9.
[55] *Inferno*, 3.37, p.57.

perfect praise but allows for the possibility of praise; in Hell, by contrast, sinners are doomed to remain ultimately disharmonious, incomplete and incomprehensible. Thus, he turns those whom history has documented so thoroughly into clamouring relics, impersonal and generic figures 'of whom we read'. In *Paradiso* however, Dante's pilgrim is serenaded on all sides by blessed souls whose superior heavenly 'song that in those sweet pipes surpasses our/ muses, our sirens, as much as a first shining/ surpasses its reflection' ['canto che tanto vince nostre muse,/ nostre serene, in quelle dolci tube,/ quanto primo splendour quel che refuse']. [56] Heavenly song not only outshines the sweetness of human poetry and music but excels in its ability to communicate the truth of divinity. This is because heavenly music represents not the Sun's (or Christ as the Son's) 'reflection' but the thing itself – imparting the first light of divine wisdom rather than a pale imitation. Just as encountering 'intellectual music' renders even the most melodious earthly music intolerable for Augustine, Dante suggests in Canto XXIII that the sound of the heavenly lyre makes all earthly music sound like a thunderclap:

> Whatever melody down here sounds
> sweetest and most draws the soul would seem
> a shattered cloud thundering,
> compared with the sounding of the lyre that
> crowned the beautiful sapphire with which the
> brightest Heaven is ensapphired.[57]
>
> [Qualunque melodia più dolce sona
> qua giù e più a sé l'anima tira,
> parrebbe nube che squarciata tona,
> comparata al sonar di quella lira
> onde si coronava il bel zaffiro
> del quale il Ciel più chairo s'inzaffira.]

Augustine also highlights this heavenly music will transcend human comprehension, remaining 'ineffable', which Dante's pilgrim is overwhelmed by in Canto XIX. The eagle in the sphere of Jupiter points out that its notes are beyond human understanding in the same way divine justice remains inexplicable:

> […] "Such as my notes
> are to you, who cannot understand them, so is
> the eternal judgement to you mortals."[58]

[56] *Paradiso*, 12.7-8, pp.244-5.
[57] *Paradiso*, 23.97-102, pp.462-3.
[58] *Paradiso*, 19.97-99, pp.384-5.

[[…] "Quali
son le mie note a te, che non le 'ntendi,
tal è il giudicio etterno a voi mortali."]

In the closing cantos of Paradiso, Dante stresses that his own trumpet is inadequate to describe the heavenly beauty of Beatrice.[59] Thus, Dante scores the pilgrim's journey from sin to grace, obscurity to illumination, Hell to Heaven in part through a musical arrangement that grows in articulation, harmony, order and sweetness according to the intellectual and moral status of its inhabitants (or chorus). The music in Heaven only sounds as sweet as its souls are.

However, for Augustine, earthly music (or praising) becomes problematic. This is because, on the one hand, the emotional sympathy it engenders in the listener (through imitation) causes them to realize their own desire for harmony and directs them towards their moral betterment; yet on the other, it also holds the potential danger that the listener will fall for the sensual quality of the song over its spiritual content. In Book X of his *Confessions*, Augustine outlines this:

> I used to be much more fascinated by the pleasures of sound than the pleasures of smell. I was enthralled by them, but you broke my bonds and set me free. I admit that I still find some enjoyment in the music of hymns, which are alive with your praises, when I hear them sung by well-trained, melodious voices. But I do not enjoy it so much that I cannot tear myself away. I can leave it when I wish. But if I am not to turn a deaf ear to music, which is the setting for the words which give it life, I must allow it a position of some honour in my heart, and I find it difficult to assign it to its proper place. For sometimes I feel that I treat it with more honour than it deserves. I realise that when they are sung these sacred words stir in my mind to greater religious fervour and kindle in me a more ardent flame of piety than they would if they were not sung; and I also know that there are particular modes in song and in the voice, corresponding to my various emotions and able to stimulate them because of some mysterious relationship between the two. But […] the gratification of my senses […] often leads [my mind] astray.[60]

Augustine may reject musical enjoyment, but what he says here belies any strong sense that he views auditory pleasure as a hindrance to belief. On the contrary, sound is associated with sensual, even erotic, experience as a route to the divine. What begins as a bold declaration that God has freed Augustine from the pleasurable bonds and allurements of music rapidly falls apart in a series of nervous counter-arguments and

[59] *Paradiso*, 30.34-36, pp.602-3.
[60] Augustine, *Confessions*, X.33, p.238.

self-amendments. Music, in particular singing, gives 'life' to liturgy, disconcerting its listeners yet concurrently (from the Latin *adquiesco* suggestive of acquiescence, assent or relaxation) brings about a state of 'repose'.[61] Augustine's assertion that 'I can leave [music] when I wish' is repeatedly undermined by his own fretful recognition of its ability to stir and soothe the imagination, which he articulates as the push and pull of seduction. Music can quieten and '[en]flame' or 'stimulate' not just the ear but the listener's mind, appealing to both their senses and intellect, by moving them more than sacred words alone could, each mode echoing and affirming their own various emotions. Though Augustine self-consciously 'waver[s] between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which, as I know from experience, can accrue from singing' he finally concludes with approval on the custom of singing in Church, 'in order that by indulging the ears weaker spirits may be inspired with feelings of devotion'.[62]

Notably, Augustine fails to fully account for how the benefits he has received from singing have furthered his own spiritual attainment, claiming that aural pleasure is beneficial only to others. Song moves those with 'weaker spirits' or feeble conviction. Augustine's reluctance to give the role of emotional and affective responses their proper due, in terms of conferring and inciting religious belief, thus seems more ideologically than practically driven – singing in churches may enable more people to reach God, but earthly pleasures should not in themselves be venerated.

In this context then, praise may be problematic and seem suspiciously close to a love for the pleasures of this world, yet Augustine cannot deny that they can move the listener to encourage religious belief, admitting 'I also know that there are particular modes in song and in the voice, corresponding to my various emotions and able to stimulate them because of some mysterious relationship between the two' and recalling the tears of delight he shed, after his conversion, on hearing the psalms of David sung. [63] Hence, it becomes less surprising that we get from such a staunch

[61] See Edward Pusey's translation 'The delights of the ear had more firmly entangled and subdued me; but Thou didst loosen and free me. Now, in those melodies which Thy words breathe soul into, when sung with a sweet and attuned voice, I do a little repose; yet not so as to be held thereby, but that I can disengage myself when I will […]'. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. by Edward Pusey (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1876), X.49, p.210.
[62] Augustine, *Confessions*, X.33, 239.
[63] Augustine, *Confessions*, X.33, p.239.

opponent of sexual desire as Augustine an affirmation of sensually fuelled praise in Augustine's most well-known saying on musical matters: 'He who sings prays twice'.[64] For Augustine, the emotional expressivity of the singer, when dedicated solely towards God, represents a double blessing because their expression renders not just a passionate and soulful outpouring of feeling but embodies a controlled expression of their inner spiritual oneness and ardour for God. This double blessing might also arise from the blessing that the singer receives for the harmony of their song and because of the emotions their song arouses in others, inciting in the listener similar states of awe, immensity, reverence or spiritual contentment.[65]

Finally, perhaps the 'mysterious relationship' Augustine identifies between song and its expression can be explained through Augustine's account, at the start of Book XI, of composing the *Confessions*:

> O Lord […] why do I lay this lengthy record before you? Certainly it is not through me that you first hear of these things? But by setting them down I fire my own heart and the hearts of my readers with love of you, so that we all may ask: *Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty?* I have said before, and I shall say again, that I write this book for love of your love.[66]

Augustine demonstrates how the force that moves one to sing or compose, is the spirit of 'love' for God, a 'fire' that originates in 'your love' (God himself) or the Holy Spirit. He suggests that there is a link between being soulful (in song), finding perfect harmony in one's body and soul and the soul's recognition of its original desire, which is to love the God that loved them first. As Catherine Conybeare has argued, Augustine's constant weaving and interspersing of lyrics of the psalms into his own writing render this work as itself a kind of extended song:

> It cannot be by chance that Augustine starts the *Confessions* in the words of a psalm: Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde ("You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised […] Augustine is singing from the very beginning. He delights in praise; he puzzles over invocation ("who calls upon you when he doesn't know you?"). Praise is sung, invocation cries aloud. The *Confessions* starts in a clamor of ecstatic sound.[67]

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[64] Foley, 'Augustine of Hippo, St.', p.2.
[65] Augustine, *Confessions*, X.33, p.238.
[66] Augustine, Confessions, XI.1-8, p.253.
[67] Catherine Conybeare, 'Reading the Confessions' in *A Companion to Augustine* ed. by Mark Vessey (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p.101.

‘An aching pulse of melodies’[68]: Devoted Souls and Soul Music

Augustine found it ‘difficult to assign [music] to its proper place’, acknowledging its role in kindling his ‘piety’ yet fearing that its sensual gratification may cloud moral judgement.[69] As such, he leaves a difficulty unresolved concerning the interaction between sacred and profane music – can the two overlap and does one inform the other? This paradox is established as a dialectic in Canto II of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, in which he employs his poetic voices to simultaneously express and dismiss profane and sacred music in order to demonstrate the inevitable failure of trying to maintain the distinction between such categories. In doing so, he explicitly depicts praise as paradoxical, oscillating between sensory pleasure and intellectual gratification, sound and silence, expression and suppression whilst highlighting a fundamental attraction to what is beyond human comprehension.

Nowhere is Dante’s concern for different categories of music more prevalent than in *Purgatorio* in which, after the choirs of babbling sinners in *Inferno*, harmonious, pleasing and rejoiceful song is performed and can be heard on every terrace. Many critics have argued that it is in the second canto that we find the clearest expression of the insurmountable distinction Dante makes between sacred music (“In exitu Israel de Aegypto” as sung by reborn souls arriving in Purgatory) and profane music (Casella’s singing of Dante’s canzone “Amor che nel la mente mi ragiona”[70] or ‘Love that discourses with me in my mind’) and Dante’s ultimate rejection of the latter as a route to salvation.[71] However, these arguments rely on separating these performances on the basis of their liturgical and poetical source material, on their expression as choral or monodic, and as active or passive – in that the singing of the psalm is seen as promoting onward motion, progress and spiritual conversion whereas Casella’s love song is figured as causing moral paralysis in its performer and audience. It is my contention that Dante blurs the boundaries between these seemingly distinct categories

[68] ‘Song and Music’, *CW*, ll.12, p.375.
[69] Augustine, *Confessions*, X.33, p.238.
[70] *Purgatorio*, 2.112, pp.40-1.
[71] See Robert Hollander, ‘Purgatorio II: Cato’s Rebuke and Dante’s scoglio’, in *Italica*, 1975, 348-368; Amilcare A. Iannucci, ‘Casella’s Song and the Tuning of the Soul.’ *Thought* 65, 1990, 27-46; Albert R Ascoli,. ‘Poetry and Theology’ in *Reviewing Dante’s Theology*, II, ed. by Claire E. Honess et al.(Bern: Peter Lang), pp. 5-42; and Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante’s Poets: Textuality and Truth in the “Comedy”* (Princeton: NJ, Princeton University Press, 1984).

in order to place *filia*, *eros* and *agape* on an equal footing and dramatize through the pilgrim's, Virgil's and the reborn souls' reluctance to scale the Mountain both a desire for and fear of God's mercy and purgation. Spiritual conversion will be found not in spite of but *as a result* of Casella's consoling performance. Through this key episode in *Purgatorio*, I will argue that Rossetti (who as I have already demonstrated in Chapter Two takes a particular interest in rewriting the liminal spaces of Dante's Purgatory) seeks to reconcile the tensions Dante sets up between sacred and profane song in his own love poetry. Thus, Rossetti creates a mystical music that unites praise for the beloved with, praise for Christ's salvific agency and praise for poetical composition, especially poetry that affirms the transcendental value of love.

Dante establishes before the performance of *either* song that both Virgil and the pilgrim are already in a state of uncertainty and passivity because they fail to heed Cato's instructions to climb up the purgatorial mountain. Cato directs Virgil and the pilgrim: 'the sun will show you, for it is rising now, where to take the mountain by an easier ascent' ['lo sol vi mosterra, che surge omai, prendere il monte a piu lieve salita.'].[72] Yet, instead of allowing the sun (light, wisdom, grace of God) to guide their way, the pilgrim finds that they were 'like people thinking about their path, who go with the heart and with the body remain' [come gente che pensa a suo cammino, che va col cuore e col corpo dimora].[73] It is this conflict between the heart, or desire for moral betterment, and a fear for the body about to undergo purgation which generates such stasis in the pilgrim, who while unable to move can still bear witness to not just one but two musical interludes.

In the first of these, Dante demonstrates how sacred music propels souls towards salvation, but then disrupts this trajectory by presenting the performance of 'In exitu Israel de Aegypto' (the great Exodus Psalm) as instilling in its singers and their audience a state of passivity and fear of God's justice:

> At the stern stood the angelic pilot, who seemed
> to have blessedness inscribed on him; and more
> than a hundred spirits were sitting within.
> "In exitu Israel de Aegypto," they were singing all

[72] *Purgatorio*, 1.106-8, pp.22-3.
[73] *Purgatorio*, 2.11-2, pp.34-5.

together with one voice, with as much of that
psalm as is written thereafter.
  Then he made the sign to them of the holy
cross; at which they all threw themselves on the
beach; and he went away as quickly as he had come.
  The crowd that remained there seemed strange
to the place, looking around as one does who
assays new things.[74]

[Da poppa stava il celestial nocchiero,
tal che parea beato per descripto;
e piu di cento spirti entro sediero.
  "In exitu Israel de Aegypto"
cantavan tutti insieme ad una voce
con quanto di quel salmo e poscia scripto.
  Poi fece il segno lor di santa croce,
ond' ei si gittar tutti in su la piaggia:
ed el sen gi, come venne, veloce.
  La turba che rimase li, selvaggia parea
 del loco, rimirando intorno come colui
che nove cose assaggia.]

The use of this Psalm has traditionally been seen by Dante scholarship as a major turning point in the *Commedia* because it signals the beginning of these souls' conversion from the bondage of purgatory, to the freedom of God's loving embrace.[75] Yet this is not just a song about liberation because – when heard in its entirety, as the pilgrim insists it is – it celebrates God's terrifying wrath against his enemies. As such the singing souls reveal their own latent fears: 'Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob./Which turned the rock into a standing water, the flint into a fountain of waters'[76] because it is in this place of purification that they will become 'pale with wonder'[77], be unmade and recast anew. The song Dante chooses to have them sing is as much about divine retribution and atonement as it is about divine mercy and the fulfilment of the covenant between God and his chosen people (reconciliation). Hence, Dante depicts sacred music paradoxically as a potential source of freedom and spiritual anxiety.

[74] *Purgatorio*, 2.43-54, pp.36-7.
[75] See Robert Hollander, 'Purgatorio II: Cato's Rebuke and Dante's scoglio', in *Italica*, 1975, 348-368; Amilcare A., Iannucci, 'Casella's Song and the Tuning of the Soul.' *Thought* 65, 1990, 27-46; Albert R. Ascoli, 'Poetry and Theology' in *Reviewing Dante's Theology*, II, ed. by Claire E. Honess et al (Bern: Peter Lang), pp. 5-42; and Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets:Textuality and Truth in the "Comedy"* (Princeton: NJ, Princeton University Press, 1984).
[76] Psalm 114.7-8.
[77] *Purgatorio* 2.69, p.37.

In *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante distinguishes between active and passive singing, arguing that one can only be said to have actively performed a song that one has oneself have composed:

> *A canzone,* according to the true meaning of the word *cantio,* is an act of singing, in an active or passive sense, just as *lectio* means an act of reading, in an active or passive sense. But let me define more precisely what I have just said, according, that is, to whether this act of singing is active or passive. And on this point it must be taken into account that *cantio* has a double meaning: one usage refers to some- thing created by an author, so that there is action - and this is the sense in which Virgil uses the word in the first book of the *Aeneid,* when he writes *'arma virumque* carzo'; the other refers to the occasions on which this creation is performed, either by the author or by someone else, whoever it may be, with or without a musical accompaniment - and in this sense it is passive. For on such occasions the *canzone* itself acts upon someone or something, whereas in the former case it is acted upon; and so in one case it appears as an action carried out by someone, in the other as an action perceived by someone. And because it is acted upon before it acts in its turn, the argument seems plausible, indeed convincing, that it takes its name from the fact that it is acted upon, and is somebody's action, rather than from the fact that it acts upon others. The proof of this is the fact that we never say that's Peter's song' when referring to some- thing Peter has performed, but only to something he has written. [78]

According to Dante's own categories of active and passive singing then, neither the reborn souls singing 'In exitu' (a hymn originally composed by David about the chosen peoples of Israel, and therefore at a third remove from the original act of praise) nor Casella's performance of 'Amor che ne la menta mi ragiona' can be deemed as acts of active singing, although Casella is perhaps at less of a remove from Dante as the composer.

Moreover, Dante depicts their praise as an almost involuntary and mechanical exercise because their singing is both prompted and ended by God's intermediaries (the presence of the 'angelic pilot', or Cato, later in the canto). They are being acted upon by external forces rather than responding to a call from within to praise. Dante highlights that once released from the unbearable presence of the angelic pilot, which the pilgrim experiences as a blinding white light 'as the divine bird came closer and closer to us, it grew brighter, so that my eyes could not sustain it up close'[79] [l'uccel

[78] Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, trans. by Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) II, viii, 3-5, p.71.
[79] *Purgatorio*, 2.37-9, pp.36-7.

divino, piu chiaro appariva,/ per che Pocchio da presso nol sostenne,], the souls 'all threw themselves on the beach;' [ond' ei si gittar tutti in su la piaggia:]. There is in this an abandonment of personal agency in giving themselves over to the 'beach' or God's mercy. Dante deliberate parallels here a moment in Canto III of *Inferno* in which Charon ferries sinners across the river Acheron, those specifically being punished for moral indecision and faithlessness. Their moral indecision has the sinners eternally – and desperately – 'throw[ing] themselves'[80] ['gittansi'] from what should be a place of stability, and hope 'from that shore one by one'[81] ['di quel lito ad una ad una] so that their desertion of the shore reenacts their desertion of God. Dante emphasizes the futility of the crossing because even as these sinners depart the reader is left with a vision of more unfortunates taking up their waiting positions) so that those 'who lived without infamy and without praise'[82] ['che visser sanza 'nfamia e sanza lodo'] are destined to reside neither here nor there on the threshold of Hell. On the reviving shore of Purgatory, Dante portrays the uncertainty and fear reborn souls experience as stemming not from a lack of commitment to salvation but from an understanding of the arduous climb that awaits them. As much as reborn souls desire God's mercy they also fear penance and the unknown unearthly pain they will have to go through to access the highest of paradisal pleasures. Souls throw themselves towards the pain of purification in Purgatory, whereas sinners in Hell desperately seek to evade God's justice but find they cannot.

Dante demonstrates how performing sacred music has no lasting effect on the reborn souls who, once bereft of their angelic guide, choose like Virgil and the pilgrim to delay the process of purgation and instead seem to lose all sense of direction, purpose or conviction. The pilgrim observes how the souls uncertain of the way forward become fascinated by his presence:

> And, as around a messenger bearing an olive
> branch people draw close to hear the news, and no
> one seems shy of crowding:
> so those fortunate souls stared at my face, all of
> them, almost forgetting to go to make themselves
> beautiful.[83]

[80] *Inferno*, 3.110, pp.60-1.
[81] *Inferno*, 3.110, pp.60-1.
[82] *Inferno*, 3.36, pp.56-7.
[83] *Purgatorio* 2.70-5, pp.38-9.

[E come a messegger che porta ulivo
tragge la gente per udir novella,
e di calcar nessun si mostra schivo,
così al viso mio s'affisar quelle
anime fortunate tutte quante,
quasi oblïando d'ire a farsi belle.]

Singing 'In exitu' may have moved these souls towards freedom but it cannot and does not inspire them to scale the mountain. Rather, they hesitate and their tentative behaviour reveals their mutual desire for and fear of purification – they both want to atone and fear the hardship of atonement – beckoned towards the mountain (they want to be virtuous) but cannot act (they do not know what it means or requires).

So instead of journeying into the unknown, these souls find themselves attracted to what is already familiar and known – an earthly reminder of their former lives (a living soul) who bears a symbol of peace and 'news' of a life they once had. Dante describes the effect of the pilgrim's presence in terms of a truce or cease-fire, as though his very bodily presence is a balm to soothe the anxious, conflicted souls who are already – even before Casella sings – distracted and 'almost' lose the purpose of their presence in Purgatory, which is to cleanse themselves of their sins in preparation to meet God.

Dante sets up the meeting between Casella and the pilgrim in order to depict them as sonorously and artistically unified because, rather uncharacteristically, the pilgrim does not recognise his dear friend on sight, but only upon hearing his voice:

I saw one of them draw forward to embrace me,
with affection so great that it moved me to do the
same.
O empty shades, except in appearance! three
times I clasped my hands behind that shade, and as
many times I drew them back to my breast
[…]
Gently it told me to stand still; then I knew who
it was, and I begged it to stop a little to speak with
me.
It replied: "Just as a I loved you in the mortal
body, so do I love you when loosed from it;
therefore I stop; but why do you come here?"
"My Casella, to return another time to where I

am do I go on this journey,"[84]

[lo vidi una di lor trarresi avante
per abbracciarmi, con si grande affetto
che mosse me a far lo somigliante.
Ohi ombre vane, fuor che ne l'aspetto!
tre volte dietro a lei le mani avvinsi,
e tante mi tornai con esse al petto. […]
Soavemente disse ch'io posasse;
allor conobbi chi era, e pregai
che per parlarmi un poco s'arrestasse.
Rispuosemi: "Cosi com' io t'amai
nel mortal corpo, cosi t'amo sciolta:
pero m'arresto; ma tu perche vai?"
"Casella mio, per tornar altra volta
la dov' io son, fo io questo v'iaggio,"]

Initially, the pilgrim observes only 'one of them' suggesting that in he is unable to discern this 'one' from this undifferentiated band of souls; so while he recognizes the need to respond in equal measure to the purity of Casella's 'affection' he cannot identify the nature of their affiliation. Moreover, their thrice-failed embrace (between living body and pure spirit or 'shade') serves to draw attention to the harmonious call and response of their voices, which is saturated with endearments and expressions of filia (brotherly love). Dante maximizes the sense that theirs is a friendship, an artistic partnership and a love or 'Amor' ('t'amai', 't'amo' in its various permutations) that persists across time and space, and which finally becomes immortalized as Casella brings to life Dante's composition. Thus, the pilgrim's aural recognition is rewarded through Casella's vocal homage to his works. The pilgrim requests:

"If a new law has not taken from you the
memory or habit of the amorous singing that used
to quiet all my desires,
let it please you to console my soul a little in that
way, for, coming here with its body, it is so
wearied!"
"Love that discourses with me in my mind," he
began then, so sweetly that the sweetness still
sounds within me.
My master and I and those people that were with
Him seemed as contented as if nothing else touched
anyone's mind.[85]

[84] Purgatorio 2.76-93, pp.38-9.
[85] *Purgatorio*, 2.106-117, pp.39-41.

[E io: "Se nuova legge non ti toglie
memoria o uso a Pamoroso canto
che mi solea quetar tutte mie voglie,
di cio ti piaccia consolare alquanto
1'anima mia, che, con la sua persona
venendo qui, e affannata tanto!"
"Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona"
comincio elli allor si dolcemente,
che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona.
Lo mio maestro e io e quella gente
ch'eran con lui parevan si contenti,
come a nessun toccasse altro la mente.]

Dante has Casella's performance, unlike the singing of the Psalm, engender a lasting effect on its singer and audience, who not only enjoys the harmony and order of its notes (its pleasing sound) or the nostalgic and earthbound content of its lyrics (this song extols the virtues of human *eros* or reason through the both real and allegorized figure of Lady Philosophy) but feel soothed or 'console[d]' by its ability to balance and temper the soul. Such is the 'sweetness' or 'dolcemente' of the song that it seems to perpetually reverberate in the poetical imagination of its composer, even tempering the construction of Dante's current composition, which is underlined in the poet's use of consonance (in the Italian) to create an internal rhyme: 'si dolcemente, /che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona'.

Hence, Dante elevates Casella's song from mere *musica instrumentalis* to *musica humana*. Furthermore, Dante does not limit the comforting effects of this song to the composer and performer but presents it as lifting 'My master and I and those people' – some hundred or so souls – out of their present state of discord, uncertainty and fear, offering instead a period of calm and stability by expressing devotion for something other than the self. This serves positively to draw all souls out of uncertainty because, as the pilgrim points out, it 'quiet[s] all my desires'. However, Dante scholarship has tended to view Casella's song as either impeding spiritual progress or exemplifying the kind of love lyric Dante is distancing himself from, as Teodolinda Barolini explains:

> Whereas formerly scholars tended to understand the idyllic qualities of the interlude with Casella, effectively ending their readings with the poet's strong endorsement in line 114 (where he says that the song's sweetness still reverbates within him), recently they have stressed Cato's rebuke as a

> correction – and indeed condemnation – of previous events. Thus, Hollander judges Casella's song severely as a secular poison in contrast to the canto's other song, the Psalm "In exitu Israel de Aegypto". [John] Freccero, on the other hand, views the episode in a more positive light, claiming that "The 'Amore' celebrated here marks an advance over the 'Amore' of Francesca's verses in the same measure that the *Convivio* marks an advance over the *Vita Nuova*.[86]

Barolini's own view meets these two in the middle, by viewing Casella's song in the context of Dante's auto-citations across all his poetical works, in order to argue that this 'the praise song for Lady Philosophy' must be ranked below 'the praise song for Beatrice' from the *Vita Nuova* so that in 'terms of [Dante's] inner poetic itinerary as reconstructed in the Comedy, Dante views the earlier *canzone* as an advance over the later one.'[87] Love trumps philosophy.

As such, my own approach to this episode seeks to recover the 'idyllic qualities of the interlude with Casella' not merely as 'the poet's strong endorsement' of his former poetical style but as means by which the souls can get over their anxieties about purgation and refocus their minds on higher things. Dante offers the reader a moment of artistic transcendence, which occurs within a poetic bubble or song within a song that unifies all Christian souls, retunes the mind and prepares them to have the fear of God put into them by Cato. Dante has Cato deliver a reminder for all souls of their true purpose here, which is not to enjoy music but to experience the pain of purification:

> […] "What is this laggard spirits?
> What negligence, what standing still is this? Run
> to the mountain to shed the slough that keeps God
> from being manifest to you."[88]
>
> [[…] "Che e cio, spiriti lenti?
> Qual negligenza, quale stare e questo?
> Correte al monte a spogliarvi lo scoglio
> ch'esser non lascia a voi Dio manifesto."]

Dante has Cato accuse all souls in hyperbolic biblical rhetoric of 'negligence' (carelessness), of being 'laggard', and being burdened with the 'slough' or mire of

[86] Barolini, *Dante's Poets:Textuality and Truth in the "Comedy"*, p.34. See also John Freccero, 'Casella's Song: *Purgatorio* II, 112' in *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, No. 91, 1973, 73-80.
[87] Barolini, *Dante's Poets:Textuality and Truth in the "Comedy"*, p.37.
[88] *Purgatorio*, 2.119-123, pp.40-1.

their sin. Yet Dante also demonstrates how hollow these epithets are because they do not carry the same implications on this side of the purgatorial shore. These souls, unlike the sinners of *Inferno*, have in crossing the shore passed the point of no return and are already guaranteed salvation. The musical interlude can hence pose no real threat to the soul's eternal peace but, indirectly, acts as a catalyst for correction and moral education, so that rather than being a dangerous and useless indulgence it is the singing of a love song, rather than the psalm, that leads to change, movement and progress, setting the souls back on the path of active purgation, as the pilgrim observes: 'turning them back to/ the mountain where reason probes us'.[89] Casella's song restores musical harmony, the harmony of human nature (by re-establishing the rule of reason) and harmony in the relationship between the souls and their Creator. Thus, in this sequence, Dante may be said to actually suggest that while praising God (as expressed through "In exitu") should be man's sole focus and desire, it must also be, in moments of all too human crisis, mediated by praise for the highest of earthly loves. Rather than distracting from God, these earthly loves have the power to redirect the performer or listener towards the right path.

Just as Dante does not completely disown the moral value of his earlier poetry, praising Lady Philosophy (or reason), neither does he dismiss his love poetry in praise of Beatrice from *La Vita Nuova* as profane. On the sixth terrace of Purgatory, Dante sets up an encounter between the pilgrim and Bonagiunta, a mid-thirteenth century poet of the Sicilian school, who relishes and is humbled by Dante's mastery of 'the sweet new style':

> But tell me if I see here the one who drew
> forth the new rhymes, beginning: 'Ladies who
> have intellect of love'?"
> And I to him: "I in myself am one who, when
> Love breathes within me, takes note, and to that
> Measure which he dictates within, I go signifying."[90]
>
> [Ma di s'i' veggio qui colui che fore
> trasse le nove rime, cominciando:
> "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore'?"
> E io a lui: "I' mi son un che, quando
> Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo

[89] *Purgatorio*, 3.2-3, pp.48-9
[90] *Purgatorio,* 24.49-54, pp.402-3.

ch'e' ditta dentro vo significando."]

Dante not only glorifies but seeks to integrate his former poetic style with his writing of the *Commedia* by recurrently relating its inspiration, the 'Love that breathes within me', to the Holy Spirit. What sets Dante the poet 'signifying' in the *Commedia*, either in praise of Beatrice (who comes to represent a fusion of Lady Philosophy, wisdom, theology and love) or God is ultimately revealed in *Paradiso* as 'the love that breathes equally between the Father and the Son' that is the creative breath of God, only and supreme source of life. Thus, Dante sanctifies all earthly love (*eros* for Beatrice and *filia* for Casella) by suggesting that it is motivated by the same force that underpins all creation, *agape*, even the mysterious workings of the Trinity.

Dante dramatizes Augustine's debate about the value of sacred versus profane song in Canto II, implying that the two overlap. Dante reveals 'In exitu' potentially hinders, as much as it advances, the purgatorial journey of reborn souls, while Casella's lovesong contains the capacity to soothe these souls, to transport them out of their fears by pointing towards a higher purpose (love) and instigating moral change. Dante's dialectical approach becomes in Rossetti's poetry an affirmation of the transcendental value of all music (fusing sacred and profane song). In that most mystical of Rossetti's sonnet's 'Heart's Hope (1871) he merges his praise of the beloved with the psalmist's language of praise, by revealing the beloved as the gateway to spiritual conversion, specifically Exodus, with the ability to free him from bondage. Rossetti's speaker searches for a language can express the depth and mystery of love:

> By what word's power, the key of paths untrod,
> Shall I the difficult deeps of Love explore,
> Till parted waves of Song yield up the shore
> Even as that sea which Israel crossed dryshod?
> For lo! in some poor rhythmic period,
> Lady, I fain would tell how evermore
> Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor
> Thee from myself, neither our love from God.
>
> Yea, in God's name, and Love's, and thine, would I
> Draw from one loving heart such evidence
> As to all hearts all things shall signify;
> Tender as dawn's first hill-fire, and intense
> As instantaneous penetrating sense,

In Spring's birth-hour, of other Springs gone by.[91]

The speaker finds that the ultimate language to express the glory, sense of deliverance and peace that love offers is that of praising song. Dante's reborn souls sang the great Exodus Psalm that propelled them towards the purgatorial 'shore' or Promised Land. Rossetti highlights that the power of praise is not only performative because 'it is parted waves of Song' that 'yield up the shore' (divine command through Moses), but transformative because the waves themselves become words. He inverts the biblical narrative of the incarnate Christ: flesh is made into the Word. Rossetti crafts a language of desire, in which not only might divinity operate through man, divinising the flesh, but divinity might be innate in nature and mankind. Hence, just as Dante sanctifies all earthly love and reveals the universal force underpinning all his poetry as the transcendental love of God, Rossetti uses his speaker's covert allusion to 'In exitu' to bring about a mystical harmony between praise of God and the beloved.

The speaker's adopted language of praise renders him unable to discern between divine love and the spiritual love of his beloved because, as he says, 'Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor/Thee from myself, neither our love from God.' Rossetti collapses the distinctions between persons and categories 'I' and 'Thy', 'Thee' and 'myself' and 'our' and 'God' in order to unify the lover, beloved, God, body and soul into one loving whole. Rossetti attempts to interweave the lovers' souls as one with each other and with the Godhead, affirming a mystical marriage that moves beyond any possible separation because earthly love becomes apotheosized and is commensurate with God's love.

However, Rossetti's speaker self-consciously finds in comparison to songs of the faithful (Psalms) that his own imitative praise sounds inadequate and disharmonious because it is composed in 'some poor rhythmic period' and no matter how transcendent and transformative the effects of the song are upon its listener or subject matter they cannot be separated from, what the speaker feels is, its actual sound that is its disappointing 'rhythm' and 'body'. Hence, while Rossetti has his speaker adopt

[91] 'Heart's Hope', *CW*, p.278.

an ambitious language of praise, he concurrently makes him always all too aware of his own poetical limitations.

Rossetti portrays a mystical revelation in the commingling of holy and sexual love: 'Tender as dawn's first hill-fire, and intense/As instantaneous penetrating sense'. Rossetti uses sibilance to compel the reader to slow down and feel the sensual sound of the words that suggest that 'sense' – suggestive of both sensation and understanding – is 'Tender': gentle or presenting great sensitivity yet rages as 'dawn's first hill-fire' burning with an unparalleled 'intense' passion that immediately pierces his speaker. Hence, Rossetti demonstrates the sensory urgency of sacred/spiritual love, which is excruciating yet insatiable, painful yet endearing and unimaginable yet a purgatorial suffering to which one should aspire.

Rossetti celebrates his speaker's mystical music-making in the sestet, who in imitation of the devotion of the Sacred Heart of Jesus draws from 'one loving heart such evidence/As to all hearts all things shall signify'. Thus, Rossetti proclaims a new kind of mystical love-song which can free the speaker from 'poor' poetic harmonies, revealing the redemptive and transformative power of Christ and instigate mystical union with God.

If in 'Heart's Hope' Rossetti heralds the beloved as the way to mystical revelation, then in 'Genius in Beauty' (1871) he imagines that she holds within her the ability to unite all forms of music:

> Beauty like hers is genius. Not the call
> Of Homer's or of Dante's heart sublime, -
> Not Michael's hand furrowing the zones of time, -
> Is more with compassed mysteries musical;
> Nay, not in Spring's or Summer's sweet footfall
> More gathered gifts exuberant Life bequeathes
> Than doth this sovereign face, whose love-spell breathes
> Even from its shadowed contour on the wall.
>
> As many men are poets in their youth,
> But for one sweet-strung soul the wires prolong
> Even through all change the indomitable song;
> So in likewise the envenomed years, whose tooth
> Rends shallower grace with ruin void of ruth,

Upon this beauty's power shall wreak no wrong.[92]

Rossetti's speaker sees in the 'Beauty' of his beloved a musical genius that surpasses all song, exceeding the poetical expression of 'Homer's or of Dante's heart sublime', all cosmic music 'Spring's or Summer's sweet foot' and, all natural talent 'gathered gifts exuberant Life bequeathes' which none is 'more with compassed mysteries musical'. This suggests that none are surrounded by as much mystery as the beloved which is what makes her musical (through the poetry she inspires), but also that she invites an all-encompassing kind of musical expression which makes her mysterious – raising the question of what came first: the music or the mystery? Rossetti's paradoxical representation of the beloved has her defy all attempts at musical categorisation: sacred or profane, cosmic, human or natural in order to suggest that it is her endless ability to kindle mystery and desire in the speaker that leads to her 'sovereign face' becoming the source and cause of all music.

Rossetti suggests that the beloved's genius arises from somewhere higher because her music takes him beyond the great poets and 'call[s]' to his soul, which when in contact with the beloved becomes 'sweet-strung'. He suggests that the beloved both harmonizes the speaker's soul and inspires his poetic composition, introducing him to the infinite because it is her 'love-spell' that from beyond the grave animates him (that 'shadowed contour on the wall') to hear the eternal music of the spheres: 'the indomitable song'. Moreover, Rossetti implies that the beloved provides not only spiritual but musical longevity for the speaker because she allows him to keep his 'youth' by preserving or 'prolong[ing]' his regenerative experience 'through all change', that is the throes of time which could disillusion the poet. Hence, the speaker experiences his beloved holding back the 'envenomed years, whose tooth/ Rends shallower grace with ruin void of ruth' blunting time's ability to bite back without 'ruth' (feelings of distress or grief) by acting as his spiritual antidote 'grace' and leaving the beloved's 'beauty's power' unscarred by the sufferings of 'change' – everlasting, untouchable and 'sublime': '[Time] Upon this beauty's power shall wreak no wrong'.

[92] 'Genius in Beauty', *CW*, p.285.

Finally, in 'Heart's Haven' (1870) a sonnet that seems on the surface only to celebrate the pleasures of sexual congress, the speaker praises the beloved as replicating Casella's ability to offer spiritual consolation and soothe the mind so that it might hear and respond to the music of the spheres:

> […] oft from mine own spirit's hurtling harms
> I crave the refuge of her deep embrace, -
> Against all ills the fortified strong place
> And sweet reserve of sovereign counter-charms.
>
> And Love, our light at night and shade at noon,
> Lulls us to rest with songs, and turns away
> All shafts of shelterless tumultuous day.
> Like the moon's growth, his face gleams through his tune;
> And as soft waters warble to the moon,
> Our answering spirits chime one roundelay.[93]

The beloved tempers the worst of her lover's excesses through 'counter-charms', hinting in the stanza that follows at something more than just physical affection. The beloved and the 'songs' which accompany her presence offer hope and clarity in God's absence at 'night' and 'rest', protection and coolness when the heat of God's presence is unrelenting at 'noon'. The speaker instils in his beloved's songs the ability to tune and influence his spirit, which he experiences as the inescapable push and pull the tide feels in response to the moon's gravity. The speaker is subject to a greater force than himself, a celestial body, that represents both the fickleness of human experience (waxing and waning of love) and yet whose heavenly motions are themselves regular, constant and harmonious. Rossetti suggests that the beloved has his speaker 'warbl[ing]' to her tune, the tune of the spheres, collapsing the boundaries between his 'spirit' and 'Our answering spirits' which perform one harmonious song or 'roundelay' that is a circle dance, suggesting both a repeating refrain or the revolving motion and orbital path of the moon – implying that the beloved and lover are intimately bound, musically and visually, 'by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars' ['l'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle'].[94]

[93] 'Heart's Haven', *CW*, ll.5-14, p.287.
[94] *Paradiso*, 33.145, pp.666-7.

Conclusion

Rossetti's double language of desire (conflating the beloved with the ultimate unseen, unheard and unknowable God) reveals something about the nature of praise itself, which is not necessarily about receiving something from God but is about fulfilling a desire within us to necessarily glorify what we enjoy. As C.S. Lewis in his *Reflections on the Psalms* would later point out 'all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise':

> The world rings with praise – lovers praising their mistresses readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favourite game—praise of weather, wines, dishes, actors, motors, horses, colleges, countries, historical personages, children, flowers, mountains, rare stamps, rare beetles, even sometimes politicians or scholars.[95]

For Lewis, we automatically and instinctively praise what we value and cannot help but implore others to share in our joy, hypothetically asking: 'Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?'. Hence, the Psalmist, in enthusiastically praising and urging others to praise God behaves in the same way as we all do when we enjoy and adore something. Indeed, Rossetti's poetry reveals his speaker's deep-seated desire to praise the beloved as his speaker's original desire to sing God's praises, and become harmonized, as Dante's pilgrim does by the end of the *Commedia*, with all orders of music. Moreover, Lewis suggests that our enjoyment is never fully realized until it is expressed or communicated with others because praise not only expresses enjoyment but 'completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation':

> It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with[96]

[95] Clive Staples Lewis, 'Reflections on the Psalms' in *Selected Books* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p.359.
[96] Lewis, pp.359-360.

For Lewis, to articulate our appreciation of the 'supremely beautiful and all-satisfying Object'[97] is to have truly attained our 'delight' yet he admits most of the time this is a struggle in which 'our expressions are inadequate, as of course they usually are' faltering in their delivery and conviction, resulting in 'merely attempts at worship; never fully successful […] sometimes total failures'. Rossetti's poetry depicts this very struggle to praise the beloved, his all-satisfying Object, while constantly realizing the inadequacy of one's praise, so that it is only in moments of sweetest articulation that he ever fully enjoys her 'compassed mysteries musical'. To be able to fully delight in God and give perfect voice to this enjoyment at all times would achieve a state of 'supreme beatitude', a state of paradisal bliss, however according to Lewis is a goal we can aim toward:

> we must suppose ourselves to be in perfect love with God – drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up with ourselves as incommunicable, hence hardly tolerable, bliss, flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression […] Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.[98]

Indeed, Rossetti's sonnets replicate this association between experience and articulation because at their happiest they most fully glorify the salvific power of the beloved 'whose voice, attuned above' becomes 'All modulation of the deep-bowered dove'[99] (the Holy Spirit) and 'music's visible tone'.[100] Although this blissful state is not available to Rossetti's speaker all the time, he too suggests that it is the seeking that is vital, so that even in 'Broken Music' his speaker finds:

> […] 'Mid doubts and fears
> Thus oft my soul has hearkened; till the song,
> A central moan for days, at length found tongue,
> And the sweet music welled and the sweet tears.[101]

[97] Lewis, p.359.
[98] Lewis, p.361.
[99] 'Mid-Rapture', *CW*, l.5, p.289.
[100] 'Heart's Compass', *CW*, l.5, p.289.
[101] 'Broken Music', *CW*, ll.5-8, p.299.

Chapter Five.

The Sound of Silence.

At the heart of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's dialectic of praise, and his presentation of mystical experience – encountering divinity through the beloved, God or a fusion of the two – is his depiction of the sound of silence.

Much critical attention has been paid to Rossetti's representation of the desired female figure as conforming to a peculiarly Victorian male fantasy of women: acting as a mirror through which the male subject might act out or view their own repressed or unwholesome desires. [1] The argument goes that Rossetti, in portraying the beloved as an enchantress or beguiling *femme fatale*, must keep her silent because if she were to have ideas or desires of her own she might challenge or contradict the masculine speaker's narcissistic construction of her as the vehicle for and fulfilment of his fantasy. Yet, this, as I have shown, overlooks how Rossetti's figuration of the beloved is informed by much more complex figurations of the female figure, particularly Dante's Beatrice but also the Bride from the Song of Songs. Why, then, is it only the earthbound speaker who gets a word in edgeways in Rossetti's poetry? While not invalidating criticism on the implied gender relations inherent in this relationship, this dichotomy of the talkative lover and silent beloved also reflects another set of binaries implicit in the relationship between a believer and God: imperfect/perfect, known/unknown, describable/indescribable, and profane/sacred: which may be enshrined in Rossetti's representation of the 'silent' beloved more than has often been noticed.

The elusive beloved replicates for Rossetti's speakers the silence of God – He who is supremely silent yet the source of all meaning and revelation – and becomes a mode

[1] See J. Hillis Miller 'The Mirror's Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Double Work of Art' *Victorian Poetry*, 29:4 (1991), 333-349, Martin A. Danahay 'Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation' *Victorian Poetry*, 32:1 (1994), 35-54., Waldman *The Demon & the Damozel: Dynamics of Desire in the Works of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* Milibank, *Dante and the Victorians*, and Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Peversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de Siecle Culture (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).)

of communicating the lover's double frustration, regret and fear (struggling to articulate their depth of feeling for the beloved or perfect praise to God and interpreting eithers silence as a rejection) and desire and hope (avoiding speech to discern the beloved or God's answering grace). Rossetti's speakers display both passive and active states of silence in order to demonstrate how, when experiencing the absence or presence of Divinity, the speaker feels first the inadequacy of his human language but then a wider a spiritual contentment, a sense of balance and harmony within himself and the cosmos, which leaves him unwilling to disrupt the palpable yet satisfying silence. Hence, the silences that punctuate Rossetti's verse are always expressive, filled with meaning, suggesting vast depths of familiarity, emotional intimacy and understanding between the speaker and his beloved that transcend the need to talk – these near prayerful silences that say everything yet say nothing.

Rossetti establishes how the beloved's silence reflects God's unknowability nowhere more clearly than in his 1871 sonnet 'Heart's Compass'. He positions the reader to see everything though his speaker's filter of interpretation:

> Sometimes thou seem'st not as thyself alone,
> But as the meaning of all things that are;
> A breathless wonder, shadowing forth afar
> Some heavenly solstice hushed and halcyon;
> Whose unstirred lips are music's visible tone;
> Whose eyes the sun-gate of the soul unbar,
> Being of its furthest fires oracular;—
> The evident heart of all life sown and mown.
>
> Even such Love is; and is not thy name Love?
> Yea, by thy hand the Love-god rends apart
> All gathering clouds of Night's ambiguous art;
> Flings them far down, and sets thine eyes above;
> And simply, as some gage of flower or glove,
> Stakes with a smile the world against thy heart.[2]

Rossetti's speaker imagines his beloved as a silent object of fascination, magnetically directing him towards the unsurpassable source and cause of all desire, by suggesting that she has hidden depths and holds a secret meaning or vast untold possibilities. He sees his beloved transcending the ordinary, mundane and contingent bounds of

[2] 'Heart's Compass', *CW*, p.289.

selfhood because she is not 'thyself alone' but 'the meaning of all things that are' imbuing the entire fabric of existence with spiritual value. She becomes grander and more profound than any natural phenomenon, more than fleshly 'eyes' and 'lips' emerging as 'A breathless wonder': an immortal sight to behold, miraculous in her stillness. She is pure spirit and takes her lover's breath away. She exceeds the transience of the body in her enduring state of being yet mirrors the ecstasy and agony of all possible experience: the exertion of sexual encounter, the stillness of death and the mystery of rebirth.

Rossetti here very literally confers a sense of divinity, immutability and omniscience upon the beloved who comes to herald the salvific agency of Christ: emblematic of 'Some heavenly solstice hushed and halcyon'. Surpassing the biannual solstice that sees the sun reach its highest or lowest point in the sky, the speaker suggests, pregnantly, that the mere presence of his beloved causes the sun to stand still in heaven, bathing him in divine light and love. She is the light of his world, but also linked to the light of the universe.[3] The beloved also brings about states of 'hushed' silences in her lover, quieting his restless soul, halcyon both in the sense of, a pre-Fallen world, but also the mythical bird that was said to charm the wind and waves into calm. Thus, the silent beloved functions as the site for reconciling the speaker's troubled psyche 'gathering clouds of Night', man and the world, and man with God.

Yet Rossetti plays with this through his speaker's highly self-conscious narration, suggesting that he does not see the beloved as she is, but as she 'seem'st' to him – an incomplete vision that he catches only sometimes, preventing him from ever possessing or understanding her fully. Her image, like God's, always evades because even when the speaker discerns her purpose it is marked by vagueness, imprecision and indirection. She signifies 'some' solstice, clearly signposting that the speaker has no comprehensive grasp of what salvation might look like. It remains something he has no real knowledge of, described in approximations yet ineffable. Just as the speaker remains uncertain as to the precise nature of her divinity, he doubts the love she represents: 'Even such Love is: and is not thy name Love?' Rossetti highlights

[3] See 1 John 1:5 in which Jesus declares 'I am the Light of the world', and 8:12 'God is light, and in him no darkness at all'.

how love itself is indescribable – thus generating its own silence – which leads the speaker into uncharted territory, incapable of being pinned down in words. without limit or measure. All the speaker can do is express, indirectly, its uplifting effects which are his only 'gage' or guarantee of its existence.

In 'Heart's Compass' then, the silent beloved both ascribes meaning to the universe and escapes definition in and of herself because she stays essentially mysterious, self-contained and unknowable. Like God, she might only be understood by her name – an infinitely flexible signifier that places her beyond all human understanding as perfection itself and hollows out its own fixity by its infinite possibility. By deliberately keeping the reader at a distance from the beloved's transporting words, Rossetti preserves the essential mystery of love, its un-representability, and suggests (paradoxically) that it can only be known by those who recognise and maintain its unknowability.

The poet, for Rossetti, is in a privileged position to bridge the gap between what is fleeting and permanent (appearance and truth) by using the multiplicity of meaning inherent in 'ambiguous art' to find a new way of talking about the beloved, which holds revelation and concealment in simultaneous suspension. Rossetti's use of sibilance recreates the reverential hush of a believer at prayer, and looked at this way, the speaker breathes a half-whispered benediction to the eternally speechless beloved. It is only in this state of (explicitly badged as) 'heavenly' contemplation that the speaker feels the transformative power of grace, finding that the beloved is the way to his spiritual elevation because she liberates his spirit from its natural confines and any obstacle that might prevent its flight to God and illumination. Hence, only when the speaker enacts silence, admitting the inadequacy of his speech, does the beloved act to unburden him and clear his soul's path to salvation. Furthermore, she appears to the speaker as wielding the power of divinely-inspired speech because she is of heaven's 'furthest fires oracular/The evident heart of all life sown and mown', returning to the theme of word and flesh through the image of the Sacred Heart.

In doing so, Rossetti articulates the beloved as the source and cause of divine mystery, hiddenness and silent wisdom. He hails her and love as knowable only as a divine

mystery, by emphasising the distance between what is spoken and the unspeakable and then collapsing the distinction between man and God. This enables the poet to speak of God through a redeemed language – to speak of God as one speaks of oneself (in God's grace) – saying what is both familiar and ineffable, something yet nothing new.

'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass'[4]: Dante, Rossetti, and mystical silence.

Rossetti's poetical endeavours should be understood as operating on a dialectic between song and silence, cataphatic and apophatic theology, locating him again firmly within the Christian mystical tradition of Augustine, Bonaventure and its poetic expression in Dante. As Denys Turner argues in *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, 'apophatic' and 'cataphatic' are technical theological terms that have their roots in the vocabulary of medieval Neoplatonic mysticism[5], whose meaning emerges in the works of, amongst others, Denys the Areopagite and Augustine. Within this mystical tradition apophatic theology takes on the shape of an 'a kind of acquired ignorance', strategy of unknowing, or paradoxically 'that speech about God which is the failure of speech', while cataphatic theology conveys 'a straining to speak' of God through as many metaphors and images as it can 'whether of science, literature, art, sex, politics [etc.]'.[6] Both kinds of theology indicate something about the nature of God himself: positive theology stresses His sheer superabundance, excess and infinite generosity while negative theology calls attention to his absence, inscrutability and silence from the world. Crucial to understanding Rossetti's mysticism, then, will be examining how the cataphatic and apophatic elements in theology interact in the medieval mysticism of Augustine and Bonaventure – because this tradition informs Dante's intellectual concerns.

The silence of God is the concept of a God whom according to Judeo-Christian theology and scripture may have communicated with His believers in the past, through

[4] 'Silent Noon', *CW*, l.8, p.285.
[5] Denys Turner, 'Cataphatic and apophatic in Denys the Areopagite', in *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.20.
[6] Turner, pp.20-1.

sacred texts or the Living Word (presence of Christ on earth) but is now silent. The issue of God's silence self-evidently also represents a nexus for interconnected theological controversies: how can an all-loving God stay silent during times of crisis, why do so many ardent prayers go unanswered and the nagging doubt that divine hiddenness confirms His non-existence, and indifference to human suffering.

For the believer, the paradox of God's silence is no mere theoretical conundrum and this is, again, most urgently dramatized in the Psalms. Silence is integral to the singer's understanding of God, their mode of devotion, and to how they view their relationship with God. As the Psalmist insists: 'Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah'[7], suggesting that those who are not silent risk profanation and blasphemy. Even those who call out to God may only experience the darker side of praise, that is God's non-reply. The Psalmist repeatedly laments God's silence, placing the speaker in the position of calling out and straining to hear for God's voice: 'O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent'[8], 'Unto thee will I cry, O Lord my rock; be not silent to me: lest, if thou be silent to me, I become like them that go down into the pit'[9] and 'To the end that my glory may sing praise to thee and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto thee for ever.'[10] Isaiah also epitomizes this conceptualisation of God: 'Verily thou art a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.'[11] This devotional mode institutes a fundamental inequality between the believer and their God because by His very incomprehensible and ineffable nature He will remain seemingly silent and unknown to them.

For Augustine, likewise, God is hidden and remote because He is beyond all human capacity to speak about Him adequately. Nonetheless, he argues in his 'Exposition of Psalm 97' that man feels compelled, no matter how ineffectively, to call out to and talk about the ineffable:

> Shout to God with joy, all the earth. You already know what it means to shout for joy. Rejoice, and speak of what makes you happy, if you can. But if you

[7] Psalm 4.4.
[8] Psalm 22.2.
[9] Psalm 28.1.
[10] Psalm 31.17.
[11] Isaiah 45.15.

> cannot find the words for it, shout for joy. Let your shouting express your gladness, if speech cannot; but one way or another do not let your joy be dumb. Let not your heart be silent about its God, or silent about his gifts.[12]

Augustine demonstrates how man cannot help but speak about God, even though the mode of this declaration, an emotional outburst of 'shouting', falls short of rational speech and cannot appropriately convey His spiritual reality or worldly blessings. It is crucial, for Augustine, that man must speak rather than give into silence yet throughout his works he continually affirms that no human expression will ever measure up to God's eternal truth. He repeatedly draws attention to the insufficiency of human language in his *De Trinitate* or On the Trinity which sets out to discuss the divine Trinity in terms of the tripartite structure of the human person:

> Yet, when the question is asked, What three? Human language labors altogether under great poverty of speech. The answer, however, is given, three persons, not that it might be [completely] spoken, but that it might not be left [wholly] unspoken.[13]
> […]
>
> For the sake, then, of speaking of things that cannot be uttered, that we may be able in some way to utter what we are able in no way to utter fully, our Greek friends have spoken of one essence, three substances[14]

Human language can only gesture towards what it ultimately fails to signify, simultaneously elevating and dismantling the language he uses to understand God and insist that God's mysteries transcend expression. Augustine's oscillation between a cataphatic and apophatic mode of speaking about the ineffable God is summed up in his work *On Christian Doctrine*:

> Have I spoken of God, or uttered His praise, in any worthy way? Nay, I feel that I have done nothing more than desire to speak; and if I have said anything, it is not what I desired to say. How do I know this, except from the fact that God is unspeakable? But what I have said, if it had been unspeakable, could not have been spoken. And so God is not even to be called unspeakable, because to say even this is to speak of Him. Thus there arises a curious contradiction of words, because if the unspeakable is what cannot be spoken of, it is not unspeakable if it can be called unspeakable. And this opposition of words is rather to be avoided by silence than to be explained

[12] Augustine, 'Exposition of Psalm 97' in *Expositions of the Psalms*, ed. by John E Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), p.461.
[13] Augustine, 'On the Trinity', *New Advent*, trans. by Arthur West Haddan, V.9 http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130105.htm [accessed 10 November 2019].
[14] Augustine, 'On the Trinity', VII.4 <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130107.htm> [accessed 10 November 2019].

> away by speech. And yet God, although nothing worthy of His greatness can be said of Him, has condescended to accept the worship of men's mouths, and has desired us through the medium of our own words to rejoice in His praise. For on this principle it is that He is called *Deus* (God). For the sound of those two syllables in itself conveys no true knowledge of His nature; but yet all who know the Latin tongue are led, when that sound reaches their ears, to think of a nature supreme in excellence and eternal in existence.[15]

It is in this 'curious contradiction of words' that the nub of the problem becomes clear. Augustine indicates that it is a desire 'to rejoice' that is to be commended and encouraged even though it leads to a conflicted theological statement: that God's knowability is located in its unknowability, in the 'unspeakable' or even better that which should 'be avoided by silence'. So much for advocating speech. Augustine's insistence that God will generously accept the inferior 'worship of men's mouths' does little to hide the deep-seated sense of futility he expresses, at the unworthiness of human speech when speaking of God. All speech offers for Augustine is a cathartic release of sound, satisfying not knowledge but the basic 'desire to speak' that is the most we can hope to offer. Just as earthly music or praising becomes problematic for Augustine, teetering on the edge of sensual indulgence, so too it seems does speaking of God.

Augustine taps into the believer's expectation that, because of His very nature and no matter how frustrating, God must stay silent and that they will feel closest to God when partaking in a state of deep meditative silence. Augustine demonstrates the transformational nature of silence most powerfully, in the account he gives of the moment of his conversion, in Book VIII of his *Confessions*. Silently overcome by emotion and tears he finds,

> I had much to say to you, my God, not in these very words but in this strain: *Lord, will you never be content? Must we always taste your vengeance? Forget the long record of our sins.* […] when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house. Whether it was the voice of a boy or a girl I cannot say, but again and again it repeated the refrain 'Take it and read, take it and read' […] I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up, telling myself that his could only be a divine command to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall.[16]

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[15] Augustine, 'On Christian Doctrine', *New Advent,* trans. by James Shaw <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1202.htm> [accessed 10 November 2019].
[16] Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.12 p.177.

It is in the meditative silence, not in the speaking of praise or the Psalmist's entreaties that Augustine alludes to here[17], that he hears the voice of God as child-song ringing in his ears. Through the simplicity of this refrain 'Take it and read' Augustine hears what he understands to be a 'divine command' to find the answers to his questioning – not through direct speech with God but through the contemplation of Scripture.

An approving attitude to silence is also found in Bonaventure's mystical treatise *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* or *The Journey of the Mind into God.* Written after a period of reflection, Bonaventure outlines how the faithful believer might ascend through the World into union with God through a three-fold process. The first stage involves discerning God's presence from without the self, looking outwards to the observable world; the second focuses on seeing God within the self, turning inwards towards the soul, and the third stage concentrates on contemplating God as he is in himself, that is above and beyond the human soul (gazing upwards through the nature of God himself). The *Itinerarium's* cosmic arrangement replicates its basic belief: '[the] universe itself is a ladder by which we may ascend to God'.[18] Bonaventure's journey holds numerous parallels with Dante-pilgrim's journey, in the *Commedia,* to come face to face with God at the apex of Paradise.

Both texts privilege silence at the climax of their journeys, and my purpose here is to show how their dual speech and speechlessness is ultimately enshrined, through Dante, in Rossetti.

In Bonaventure's *Itinerarium,* it is significant that after seven chapters of describing how man might reach and experience God, when the moment of consummation finally arrives, Bonaventure advocates taking up a vow of silence:

> He who loves this death can see God, for it is absolutely true that *Man shall not see me and live*. Let us, then, die and enter into the darkness. Let us silence all our cares, our desires and our imaginings. With Christ crucified, let us pass *out of this world to the Father*, so that, when the Father is shown to us, we might say with Philip: *It is enough for us.*[19]

[17] Psalm, 6.4 and 79.5, 8.
[18] Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind into God*, ed. by Stephen Brown (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993),1.2, p.5.
[19] Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind into God*, 7.6, p.39.

Bonaventure, rather shockingly, suggests that the wayfarer will voluntarily choose death, darkness and silence at the point of union and illumination in the presence of God's own Word, 'Christ crucified'. This is not merely because the awesome presence of the Divine proves unbearable for mortal perception, making silent and obliterating all who look upon them (a theme familiar from classical mythology, for example when Semele cannot withstand Jupiter in all his glory).[20] Bonaventure proposes not a failure of intellect, but rather implies that we will choose silence and move into a complete state of what Denys Turner calls, '"high" Neoplatonic apophaticism'[21]:

> For there is a very great difference between the strategy of negative propositions and the strategy of negating the propositional; between that of the negative image and that of the negation of imagery. The first of these belongs to the cataphatic in theology, and only the second is the strategy of the apophatic […][22]

Turner argues that Bonaventure's kind of unsaying is not content with naming God in all manner of paradoxical and indirect ways, and then negating these negative statements because all this would ultimately serve to do is linguistically manifest how God's presence conquers language – leading us back to something positive to say about God.[23] Instead, Bonaventure goes further by rejecting all talk and thought of God, cautioning against such complacency: 'when you contemplate these things, take care that you do not think you can understand the incomprehensible'. [24] At the decisive moment, Bonaventure would have the believer abandon the intellect altogether, counselling: 'ask grace, not learning; desire, not understanding; the groaning of prayer, not diligence in reading'.[25] Desire triumphs over reason and where desire soars, the intellect cannot give chase.

Following Turner's interpretation then, Bonaventure promotes an apophatic theology of the most extreme kind, arguing that the only true way to speak of God is through the gospel of silence. It is with ardour that we choose to set aside ourselves, to joyously conform to God's will and enter into a satisfied silence, to feel and not to speak because this is the only route to true knowledge of God. Following Christ, the

[20] See Ovid, Metamorphoses, III.297-321, p.60.
[21] Turner, p.133.
[22] Turner, p.35.
[23] Turner, p.129.
[24] Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind into God*, 6.3, p.34.
[25] Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind into God*, 7.6, p.39.

believer must sacrifice all that is worldly, 'transcend[ing] yourself and all things'[26], letting a belief in and longing for God be '*enough for us*'. For Bonaventure, only when we realise how hollow our speech rings will we get nearer to speaking truly of God.

Like Bonaventure, upon encountering God Dante's pilgrim elects to silence all sound and vision until all that is left, significantly, is desire:

> within itself, in its very own color, seemed to
> me to be painted with our effigy, by which my
> sight was all absorbed.
> Like the geometer who is all intent to square
> the circle and cannot find, for all his thought, the
> principle he needs:
> such was I at that miraculous sight; I wished to
> see how the image fitted the circle and how it
> enwheres itself there.
> But my own feathers were not sufficient for
> that, except that my mind was struck by a flash in
> which its desire came.
> Here my high imagining failed of power; but
> already my desire and the *velle* were turned, like
> a wheel being moved evenly,
> by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.[27]
>
> [dentro da sé, dal suo colore stesso
> mi parve pinta de la nostra effige:
> per che 'l mio viso in lei tutto era messo
> Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige
> per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
> pensando, quel principio ond' elli indige:
> tal era io a quella vista nova;
> veder voleva come si convenne
> l'imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova.
> Ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne,
> se non che la mia mente fu percossa
> da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.
> A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa,
> ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l *velle*,
> sì come rota ch' igualmente è mossa,
> l'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.]

[26] Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind into God*, 7.5, p.39.
[27] *Paradiso*, 33.127-45, pp.666-7.

The silence Dante gives his readers at the end of the *Commedia* is not (as it might appear on first glance) a simple kind of passive silence, constituting a linguistic failure. Rather it is reached through the pilgrim's participation in meditating on the confounding imagery of the Godhead. What changes here is not the pilgrim's linguistic prowess, his adeptness at crafting neologisms such as 'enwheres itself' [s'indova] to verbally depict the transcendence and immanence of God (as both located within and outside of time) is a testament to that. The pilgrim does not suddenly realise that his all too human language is not rich, 'sufficient', or versatile enough to unravel the infinite mystery of God: he has known and experienced this from the beginning of the canto:

> To signify transhumanizing *per verba* is
> impossible; therefore let the comparison
> suffice for those to whom grace reserves the experience.[28]
>
> [Trasumanar significar *per verba*
> non si poria; però l'essemplo basti
> a cui esperïenza grazia serba.]

Even as the poet demonstrates his linguistic dexterity by defying his human limitations and coining the 'impossible' phrase, it is only impossible because its referent is beyond ordinary human experience. He demonstrates here the way in which all human language is stretched to its limits in talking of the divine, and must resort to metaphor or making 'comparison[s]'. While poetical invention may gesture towards the incommensurable it cannot take you there, only being in a state of 'grace', or illumination as a result of divine intervention can deliver the privileged, wordless 'experience'. As Michael Kensak argues, in Dante it is grace which 'transforms the silence of human limitation into the silence of reverent contemplation' and enables the poet to retell his encounter in a redeemed language. [29]

This reverential, contemplative silence is key in the *Paradiso*: Dante depicts all blessed souls reconciled to a state of supreme solemnity, breaking their silence only to enlighten the pilgrim. Once Cunizza has taught the pilgrim about the glass-like structure of the heavens, she promptly returns to her position of quietude in the celestial hierarchy: 'Here she fell silent, and it seemed to me she/ turned to something

[28] *Paradiso*, 1.70-72, pp.26-7.
[29] Michael Kensak, 'The silences of pilgrimage: 'Manciple's Tale, *Paradiso*, Anticlaudianus' *The Chaucer Review*, 34:2 (1991), 191.

else, taking her place in the/ wheel where she had been before'[30] ['Qui si tacette, e fecemi sembiante/ che fosse as altro volta, per la rota/ in che si mise com'era davante']. Beatrice, after counselling the pilgrim that Christians should be slow to make vows to God, reverts to a contagious stillness: 'Her silence and her transmuted face imposed/ silence on my eager mind, which/ already had new questions before it' ['Lo suo tacere e 'l trasmutar sembiante/ pusoer silenzio al mio cupido ingegno,/ che già nuove questioni avea davante'].[31] Beatrice remains silent for the entirety of the following canto and only disturbs her peace to save the pilgrim from 'puzzling'[32] ['pensier miso'] over some words of Justinian. And indeed, it is only after the star-dance of the theologians has been hushed that Bonaventure himself appears:

> After the solemn dance and the great
> rejoicing, both of the singing and of the flaming
> of light with light, joyous and affectionate,
> ceased all together in one instant and with
> one will […] came a voice […]
> and it began: "The love that makes me
> beautiful draws me to speak of the other leader
> because of whom my own has been so praised here [33]
>
> Poi che 'l tripudio e l'altra festa grande
> sì del cantare e sì del fiammegiarsi
> luce con luce gaudïose e blande,
> insieme a punto e a voler quetarsi
> […] si mosse voce
> […] e cominciò "L'amor che mi fa bella
> Mi traffe a ragionar de l'altro duca
> Per cui del mio ben sì ben ci favella

Dante renders Bonaventure (head of the Franciscans) silent on all subjects, except that of praising 'the other leader' of the Church – Dominic – patron of the Franciscan's rival order. In doing so, Dante depicts Bonaventure as a conciliatory figure, who reconciled to God in the afterlife now only seeks to heal divisions within the Church. By stressing the need for a unified Catholic Church, Dante extends Bonaventure's directive to quiet 'our cares, our desires and our imaginings' to Christendom at large. Moreover, in the sphere of the Sun, Thomas Aquinas must unsettle 'the silence among

[30] *Paradiso*, 9.64-6, pp.190-1.
[31] *Paradiso*, 5.88-90, pp.108-9.
[32] *Paradiso*, 7.21, pp.148-9.
[33] *Paradiso*, 12.22-33, pp.244-247

the concordant deities'[34] ['Ruppe 'l silenzio ne' concordi numi'] to explain why King Solomon is the wisest of all men. The natural condition of all blessed souls in Paradise is that of an impeccable serenity. Hence, Dante continually portrays communication between the blessed and the pilgrim in the *Paradiso* as occurring wordlessly – viewing rather than hearing the pilgrim's thoughts in the Divine Mirror of God – so that the final stage of the journey to God takes the shape of a monastic silence intermittently broken.

Dante makes the pilgrim feel the inadequacy of human speech at every step in his ascension, so it is only to be expected that when confronted by the singularity of mystical experience he finds, once again, that his language cannot hold its weight: 'Like the geometer who is all intent to square/ the circle and cannot find, for all his thought, the/ principle he needs'. It is precisely because language has limitations and a logic to it, like geometry, that the pilgrim sees it as an inappropriate tool to pin down or explicate the divine mystery. Thus, the pilgrim casts himself, in the attempt to do so, as the peddler of finite difference, logical inference and pure intellect in order to draw attention to his misapprehension. Human language cannot give knowledge of God but will only lead one grasping blindly for 'the/principle that he needs'. There is no linguistic precept to shape one's understanding of this mystical union and trying to decipher it is tantamount to trying to play a game without any recognisable rules. Human language cannot solve the mystery of the unknowable God.

Dante suggests that what fundamentally changes during the Beatific Vision is the pilgrim's affective responses. He stops wanting to articulate the vision, shifting from a wish to see (i.e. to read and understand the image before him) to relinquishing an engagement with imagery altogether. Precisely when he acknowledges that 'my own feathers were not sufficient' to square the circle does Dante's pilgrim experiences the epiphanic 'flash'[35] or 'thunderbolt'[36] ['fulgore'] of divine illumination in all its glory. Yet unlike Semele he is not 'turned to ashes'[37] ['cener fissi'] or 'shattered'[38] by this

[34] *Paradiso*, 13.31, pp.268-9.
[35] *Paradiso*, 33.140, pp.666-7.
[36] *Paradiso*, 21.12, pp.420-1.
[37] *Paradiso*, 21.6, pp.420-1.
[38] *Paradiso*, 21.12, pp.420-1.

act of love because his mind is ready to accept 'its [true] desire', that is the complete submergence of the self into the divine subject.

Immediately Dante quells his intellectual curiosity and divests his poetic imagery of its potency: 'Here my high imagining failed of its power'. Neither speech nor understanding can remain. The pilgrim feels his '*velle*', or will, is synced to God's loving design, moving in perfect harmony as a 'wheel being turned evenly' He no longer feels the need to hold still this moment, or pin it down in words for fear of losing meaning or understanding because, at this moment of bliss, he is complete in himself and full of the meaning of all that ever was and will be – in complete synchronicity with God's will and language.

Thus, the silence at the poem's end is a comfortable and easy one, an apotheosis, both desired and 'the goal of all [the pilgrim's] desires'.[39] Dante lays to rest all linguistic expectation, letting go of the urgency and anxiety to capture the ineffable, and it is in the ensuing satisfied silence when the pilgrim accepts his limitations and God's essential unknowability that illumination strikes. Yet all that the poet can describe in relation to this illumination is that he is moved by God's love, which like his descriptor 'trasumanar' means little unless felt, frustrates as much as it satisfies, mystifies as much as it clarifies and proves unquantifiable or 'impossible' to know.

Thus, for Dante, like Bonaventure, it is in silence we attain reconciliation. The poet gives the reader just enough to mark or 'signify' the gravity of the pilgrim's experience, which language both hints at and hides, with a deft sleight of hand indicating how all his priorities have been re-orientated and reconfigured to fit God's ever-mysterious will. Human language must give way to God's word which is Love.

By placing silence at the heart of the Beatific Vision, Dante in the *Commedia* thus replicates God's silence to the reader *en patria*. No matter how close-confiding their intimacy has been, the reader cannot follow the pilgrim into self-surrender and the hushed ecstasy of unknowing. The reader can only imagine how such an experience feels: to be perfectly happy and satisfied, yet continually wanting for God's love and

[39] *Paradiso,* 33.46, p.663.

glory. Dante offers enough to keep the 'flame' of desire alive, preserving God's unknowability and alerting us to an experimental space made available only through the text in which the reader can participate in and view the dynamics of desire for God under controlled conditions.

For Vittorio Montemaggi, it is this principle of love as unknowability, and the implications for our experience of human love of that principle, that invigorates the entire *Commedia*:

> […] man ultimately cannot and will not, even in Heaven, fully come to know God; what man can and ought to do, and most perfectly will do in Heaven, is to participate in the love which God is. And, for Dante, human beings may participate, may be, the love which God is through their relationships with one another, relationships which ought to be modelled on and partake in the life of Christ.[40]

Crucial to understanding Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'mysticism', then, will be understanding how he approaches this tension between speaking the divine, necessarily set round with metaphor and imagery, (cataphatic) interacts with its negation or silence (apophatic): tensions that Bonaventure approaches theologically and Dante poetically.

Rossetti picks this up through his double language of desire, by depicting the relationship between the loquacious lover and the silent beloved as an allegory for that between the human soul and the silent unknowable God. Rossetti suggests that this sense of ineffability and mystery is caused by the necessary one-sided nature of affection for the divine (either beloved or God whose reciprocity cannot be measured or quantified) so that what it leaves the believer with is an emotional assent, faith or trust that God will offer them eternal love and salvation. Love, for Rossetti, requires an act of faith in something beyond the self – so what remains is a strong sense of uncertainty, because epistemological and ontological questioning is not limited to God. As we have seen there is a precedent for this in Dante, and Rossetti portrays relations with others as revolving around the same unknowingness, the same doubt

[40] Vittorio Montemaggi, 'In Unknowability as Love: The theology of Dante's Commedia' in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, p.62.

and instead of being a merely philosophical issue it claims greater urgency because it must be dealt with in the everyday running of life.

In his 1870 chalk drawing 'Silence' (fig.16), Rossetti portrays the beloved as the embodiment of mystery and (so to speak), visible silence.

Fig. 16 Dante Gabriel Rossetti 'Silence', 1870. Brooklyn Museum, New York.

His model Jane Morris reposes draped in white and bathed in a golden light, the source of which is not traceable, but suffuses everything in the scene. She is utterly still, except for her right hand which draws a curtain around herself, shrouding her and the viewer from whatever is beyond the veil. As Rossetti explained in his letter of July 1878 to her: 'Silence holds in her hand a branch of peach, the symbol used by the ancients; its fruit being held to resemble the human heart and its leaf the human tongue. With the other hand she draws together the veil encircling the shrine in which she sits'.[41] All the viewer sees is what she wants them to see – and she as the figure of silence looms large – surpassing both the 'human heart' that is the desire to speak and

[41] *DGRJM*, p.71.

the ‘human tongue’ the ability to praise, rendering them still, passive and inanimate. The viewer is made to look (the only place they can) into her knowing eyes, which are full of a secret meaning, reflecting back a solemnity and perhaps fear of what they have seen behind the veil. Rossetti’s mention of ‘shrine’ and ‘veil’ hints that the silence the figure represents is sacred or holy, which suggests that she keeper of divine knowledge – perhaps holding the secret of the soul’s state in the afterlife. Rossetti to a point dramatizes how the silent beloved both hints at some knowledge of the divine, yet preserves its essential unknowability in order to present a love that is too profound and poignant for words.

Rossetti examines his construction of the silent beloved in his 1881 sonnet ‘True Woman. I. Herself’, which though usually linked with his oil painting *The Day Dream* (fig.17) (William Michael in his commentary on the sonnet records that during its composition his brother was working on *The Day-Dream*)[42] – can be seen as part of a cluster of final works that develop a thematic interest in the beloved as an exemplar of and gateway to a deep meditative silence.

> How strange a thing to be what Man can know
> But as a sacred secret! Heaven's own screen
> Hides her soul's purest depth and loveliest glow;
> Closely withheld, as all things most unseen,—
> The wave-bowered pearl,—the heart-shaped seal of green
> That flecks the snowdrop underneath the snow.[43]

Just as the viewer is cut off from divine knowledge by a curtain in *Silence*, the speaker here is separated from the eternal mystery of the beloved by ‘Heaven’s own screen’ which the speaker can speculate ‘Hides her soul’s purest depth and loveliest glow’ but cannot experience or verify. Rossetti’s speaker recognizes the paradox implicit in his view of the beloved as known only as unknowable, picturing her as both near and far away from him: ‘Closely witheld’ in order to position her as the bridge between ‘Man’ and the ‘sacred secret’ because she partakes in the divinity of ‘all things most unseen’.

[42] William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer* (London: Cassell and Company Limited, 1889), p.222.
[43] ‘True Woman. I. Herself’, ll.9-14, p.303.

Fig. 17 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Day Dream*, 1880. V&A, London.

Rossetti renders the beloved of *The Day Dream* in a similar state of seclusion, entwined amongst a lush woodland in an attitude of profound contemplation. What sparks her reverie or what its contents are remain mysterious because the central focus of Rossetti's painting and its accompanying sonnet hone in on the connection between her stillness, deep concentration and her eternal vision. Undistracted by the earthly hum of her surroundings 'The embowered throstle's urgent wood notes'[44] or the 'spiral tongues'[45] of newly budding flowers, the beloved becomes an emblem of 'summer silence'[46] containing hidden depths and vast untold possibilities. The speaker sees her as surpassing the ordinary, worldly and contingent because though she may look 'tow'rd deep skies' this is 'not deeper than her look'.[47] The beloved becomes deeper, vaster and grander than the beauty of nature and is 'spirit-fann'd'.[48] That is, the

[44] 'The Day-Dream', l.5, p.426.
[45] 'The Day-Dream', l.8, p.426.
[46] 'The Day-Dream', l.6, p.426.
[47] 'The Day-Dream', l.12, p.426.
[48] 'The Day-Dream', l.11, p.426.

potency of her imagination is stirred by her immortal soul, transcending the transience of nature in her permanent state of being, a constant and invulnerable to the passage of time.

The beloved thus replicates the silence of God and engenders a state of silence in the speaker, in a dynamic familiar from Bonaventure and the *Paradiso.* In 1871, when Rossetti was living at Kelmscott Manor with Jane Morris (the subject of 'Silence' and *The Day Dream*) he composed a sonnet entitled 'Silent Noon', depicting a happy and tranquil hour for reunited lovers.[49] It title may also convey the time of day, at which God's light and love is at its highest point and least fathomable. Rossetti's speaker shows that he feels closest to knowing the beloved when partaking in such deep meditative silence, observing:

> Your hands lie open in the long fresh grass,—
> The finger-points look through like rosy blooms:
> Your eyes smile peace. The pasture gleams and glooms
> 'Neath billowing skies that scatter and amass.
> All round our nest, far as the eye can pass,
> Are golden kingcup-fields with silver edge
> Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorn-hedge.
> 'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass.
>
> Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragon-fly
> Hangs like a blue thread loosened from the sky:—
> So this wing'd hour is dropt to us from above.
> Oh! clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower,
> This close-companioned inarticulate hour
> When twofold silence was the song of love.[50]

It is in the moment, when the speaker is reconciled with his beloved and with the natural world, that he feels a sense of physical and spiritual contentment that he can only express as a paradox: ' 'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass'. Such palpable silence encapsulates the complete satisfaction to be found in self-surrender that categorizes both Bonaventure and Dante's encounters with the divine. By giving oneself over to the 'wing'd hour' of love that comes from the infinite because it is 'dropt to us from above' the lovers are able to hold 'still' the fleeting moment,

[49] 'Silent Noon', *The Rossetti Archive*, ed. by Jerome McGann <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/7-1871.raw.html> [accessed 30 October 2019].
[50] 'Silent Noon', *CW*, p.285.

rendering it 'visible' and preserving it through poetical articulation. However, Rossetti's use of 'Oh!' reduces the lover's speech of this experience to an emotive exclamation, emphasising that whatever physical or spiritual harmony he found cannot be contained in human language – which will always come up short. All that the speaker can hope for, by the sonnet's end, is to call the feeling back and experience once again that 'inarticulate hour' in which he felt united with the beloved, being 'close-companioned', and relive the 'twofold silence' that was the only way to express one's 'love'. Rossetti's final line 'When twofold silence was the song of love' rekindles the paradox at the heart of his sonnet, literally it recalls a time when both lovers were silent (the song's subject) but also suggests that silence itself is 'twofold': it can only be manifest to those able to speak and makes speech possible by lending it structure (making speech discernible from pure noise through gaps or pauses in sound and give it meaning and poignancy). Like Bonaventure and Dante, Rossetti highlights the co-dependency that exists between speech and silence – because though spiritual contentment may be best served by silence, it is by articulating such silent experiences that the poet may express the inexpressible in his 'song of love'.

The beloved's ability to intuit, temper and express the lover's emotional responses in moments of complex silence is persistent in *The House of Life*. In 'The Birth-Bond' the lover expresses his deeply-held affinity as a kind of psychic understanding: 'In act and thought of one goodwill; but each/ Shall for the other have, in silence speech,/ And in a word complete community?'[51] rendering the beloved 'Known for my soul's birth-partner well enough!'.[52] Visceral silence indicates not only a sense of balance, unity and harmony between lovers but also between man and the cosmos. For instance, in 'Gracious Moonlight' (1871) (a title which indicates the beloved's pleasant appearance and her grace-giving capacity) Rossetti's speaker both appeals for a language in which to praise his beloved's beauty and views her as the spring and goal of all value:

> So lambent, lady, beams thy sovereign grace
> When the drear soul desires thee. Of that face
> What shall be said, - which, like a governing star,
> Gathers and garners from all things that are

[51] 'The Birth-Bond', ll.6-9, p.283.
[52] The Birth-Bond', l.14, p.283.

Their silent penetrative loveliness?[53]

Rossetti's speaker envisions his beloved as the newly rising Sun that 'governing star' of the speaker's spiritual ascent because she glows softly with 'sovereign grace' in response to his inferior 'drear soul', drawing him out of the obscurity of 'night's gloom' and 'the soul's grief' to the spiritual renewal and rebirth offered by 'Spring'. He suggests that the arrival of her light and warmth not only supports and encourages life but elevates all creation, including him, increasing its 'silent penetrative loveliness'. Using the dawning Sun as a figure for Christ is pervasive in Dante's *Commedia* and Rossetti employs the same set of allusions to connect the beloved's ability to orient her lover's soul with her natural and divine power to create and sustain life.[54]

As well as revealing proximity to the grace of the divine – through the emotional, spiritual and physical ease found in quiet – Rossetti also shows how silence can convey a distance between man and God, through the figure of the lover and beloved. As such 'Known in Vain' acts as a counterpoint to 'Silent Noon' dramatizing what happens when lovers fail to properly intuit and apprehend each other's state of mind:

As two whose love, first foolish, widening scope,
  Knows suddenly, to music high and soft,
  The Holy of holies; who because they scoff'd
Are now amazed with shame, nor dare to cope
With the whole truth aloud, lest heaven should ope;
  Yet, at their meetings, laugh not as they laugh'd
  In speech; nor speak, at length; but sitting oft
Together, within hopeless sight of hope

For hours are silent:—So it happeneth
  When Work and Will awake too late, to gaze
After their life sailed by, and hold their breath.
  Ah! who shall dare to search through what sad maze
  Thenceforth their incommunicable ways
Follow the desultory feet of Death?[55]

Rossetti's speaker suggests that when 'foolish' lovers rush into a physical relationship without 'first' gaining emotional or spiritual understanding of the other they miss out

[53] 'Gracious Moonlight', ll.5-8, p.286.
[54] See my chapter on Earthly Paradise that links Beatrice with the dawn and the figure of Christ.
[55] 'Known in Vain', ll.1-14, p.308.

on the bliss of mystical union, significantly, 'The Holy of holies'. Rossetti plays on the double meaning of 'Knows suddenly' to suggest the lovers dawning realisation of and sexual awakening to the most sacred of encounters – that between lover and beloved or man and God. He alludes to the Holy of Holies, which in the Jewish tradition is the innermost chamber of the Tabernacle in which it was believed that God's presence actually dwelt. Access to this sanctum was strictly prohibited. Only the high priest might enter this room and even then, only once a year to perform an incense ritual in atonement for the sins of Israel – for the festival of Yom Kippur – after which he would pronounce before the congregation the proper name of God. The enunciation of this is no longer known.[56]

However, unlike this ancient rite, the derisive lovers do not emerge from such mystical experience renewed and reconciled to sacred speech – performing the perfect vocalisation of God's name – but instead 'dare not cope/ With the whole truth aloud'. Instead, they collapse into an unsettling, awkward silence. Rossetti highlights how painfully close, yet far away, the lovers are from mystical union, being in a privileged position to access an intense physical experience yet unable to identify or pronounce it as 'holy'. Unable to feel the joy, concord or harmony of the experience they are separated from its uplifting effects – a rare gift that is only possible, as Dante suggests, for 'those to whom grace reserves the experience'.[57]

Rossetti suggests that the lovers' fleshly indulgence in the 'music' of their love-making leaves them unable to appreciate the emotional or spiritual significance of the encounter, rendering them post-coitally 'amazed with shame' and feeling more isolated than ever from each other and feeling a sense of sinfulness. The speaker recalls that they 'laugh not as they laugh'd/ In speech; nor speak, at length; but sitting oft/ Together, within hopeless sight of hope'. Rossetti portrays his lovers as 'close-companioned' yet unable to traverse the gulf of inarticulacy that separates them, leading to a despairing vision in which the prospect of 'hope' or salvation in or through their love becomes unspeakable.

[56] Sara E. Karesh et al. (eds) 'Holy of Holies', in *Encyclopedia of Judaism* et al. (New York, NY: Infobase Publishing, 2006), p.218.
[57] *Paradiso*, 1.72, pp. 26-7.

The lovers fall into a passive silence because the 'Will' to believe in one another 'awake[s] too late', rendering all spiritual and emotional meaning lost in a 'sad maze' of misunderstanding, missed opportunities and indecision. Rossetti indicates that the lovers lack the moral agency and desire to be redeemed by mystical experience, which like 'their life sailed by', suggesting that they are being acted upon by external forces (Rossetti's capitalisation of 'Work', 'Will' and 'Death' serve to stress this) and transferring all moral responsibility away from themselves. Involuntarily and inexorably, they 'Follow the desultory feet of Death?'.

Importantly, Rossetti reveals that Death in all its guises – spiritual, emotional, physical and poetical – is a kind of painful incoherence, a 'desultory' half-hearted rambling, and it is this aimless silence that occasions the demise of the lovers' relationship and damnation. He confuses the speaker's confused state still further by conjuring up an image of the blind leading the blind in order to reflect a total overhaul of purpose, direction or meaning without spiritual love, which remains 'incommunicable'. The lovers can only 'hold their breath', that is wait in anticipation to know the full consequences of their carelessness in the afterlife. Yet, even this destination remains unclear. Rossetti's use of rhetorical question only adds to the negative strategy of unsaying that invigorates this sonnet, the niggling doubt that prevents and disrupts any sense of resolution or closure. He also subtly questions the mercy of the moral framework he sets up, implicitly asking: who shall bear witness to their road to perdition? Does anyone care? Rossetti suggests that while the poet is in a special position to understand and express the lovers linguistic struggle, even he cannot save them from the self-destructive throes of incomprehensibility.

Rossetti maximizes the sense that the divine can only be spoken of through an active silence, by blurring the boundaries between God and the beloved and deeming the beloved's name as too holy to pronounce. By choosing not to speak the beloved's name aloud, Rossetti's poems emulate the orthodox Jewish tradition that considers uttering God's name (YHWH) to be blasphemous, instead opting to call God simply Adonia or HaShem meaning 'my Lord' or 'the Name'.[58] Speaking the name of God aloud carries great cosmic power and salvific agency, as Peter Schaffer indicates,

[58] Karesh, 'God, Names of', p.179.

because the 'name of God works wonders – with it, Moses was able to part the sea and pile the waters up into high 'mountains'.[59] Invoking God's name causes his creative power to manifest – an omnipotent force that delivers both a sense of awe and sublime terror.

Rossetti's appropriation of this practice is once again most vividly expressed through the speaker of 'Heart's Hope', who searches for right words to convey the mysteries of love:

> Yea, in God's name, and Love's, and thine, would I
> Draw from one loving heart such evidence
> As to all hearts all things shall signify

The speaker renders the name of God, Love, and the beloved; divine and earthly love, one and the same and a boundless source of meaning for all. As with Moses, the speaker's invocation of God's name causes His creative and transformative power to appear because it 'yield[s] up the shore/ Even as that sea which Israel crossed dryshod', leading the speaker to a verbal Promised Land or redeemed language through which to express his erotic epiphany:

> Tender as dawn's first hill-fire, and intense
> As instantaneous penetrating sense,
> In Spring's birth-hour, of other Springs gone by.

Rossetti displays how such mystical experience emerges from a kind of active silence because the sonnet starts with an appeal to the unknown and unspeakable 'word's power' and yet never unravels its mystery. Even as the speaker utters God's name and obscures his beloved's, he realizes that he cannot quite comprehend their distinction. Instead he feels that they have become unified: 'Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor/ Thee from myself, neither our love from God'. Rossetti concurrently emphasizes the limitations of language and dismantles the distance between man and God by suggesting that one can only speak of God as one speaks of, or understands, oneself in a state of 'love'.

[59] Peter Schafer, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p.56.

Rossetti turns the silence at the heart of mystical experience into an effluence of words because his speaker's extravagant imagery presents a time of abundance with 'Spring' suggesting the height of fecundity and 'birth-hour' conveying Creation (of the universe and of the individual) but also harking back to 'Springs gone by', compounding levels of productivity into a state of superabundance. The speaker resorts to the only language he knows to speak about the unspeakable: the passion felt by 'one loving heart'. All his grand revelation about the nature of love comes down to is a personal affection for an other – ambiguously divine or mortal – who as Richard Kearney puts it 'beckons but has not yet fully arrived, who is presence in absentia'[60]. Speaking God's name aloud might facilitate the speaker's insight but the beloved's name remains too precious for speech, visually showing how God can only be spoken of as that which is inexpressible. Just as Dante's pilgrim offers a wealth of geometric imagery to describe his impossible vision of God only to realize that it is 'insufficient'[61] and returns to speaking about the inexpressible in terms of 'desire'[62], Rossetti's speaker follows suit. Hence, when all is said and done it is love that breathes life into Rossetti's (and Dante's) system of imagery: the Love 'that moves the sun and the other stars.' [63]

The beloved breaks her silence rarely in *The House of Life*, for example in the ninth sonnet of the sequence 'Passion and Worship' (1870). Its numerical positioning in the sequence is significant because Dante recurrently associates Beatrice with the holy number 9 in his works, and it carries significance in the Christian numerological tradition apart from Dante as a figure for the trinity.[64] As such, Rossetti solidifies the connection between his figure of the beloved and Beatrice – because just as Beatrice sanctions Dante to write the *Commedia* as a divine scribe, just before they enter Paradise[65], so too does Rossetti's beloved speak to sanctify his poetic enterprise of reconciling sexual desire and spiritual love:

[60] Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p.61.
[61] *Paradiso*, 33.139, pp.666-7.
[62] *Paradiso*, 33.141, pp.666-7.
[63] *Paradiso*, 33.145, pp.666-7.
[64] For an elaboration of Beatrice's divine association with the number nine, see Kaye Howe, 'Dante's Beatrice: The Nine and Ten', *Italica*, 52.3 (1975), pp.364-371.
[65] Purgatorio, 33.52-54, pp.568-9: 'Do you take note and just as they come from me/ write these words to those who live the life that is/a race to death'.

Then said my lady: 'Thou art Passion of Love,
  And this Love's Worship: both he plights to me.
  Thy mastering music walks the sunlit sea
But when wan water trembles in the grove
And the wan moon is all the light thereof,
  This harp still makes my name its voluntary.'[66]

The beloved speaks to praise the speaker's 'mastering music' or poetry, which finds its most profound and sacred expression when it pledges both affection and adulation, and depicts love as both sexual and spiritual. When it achieves this, his poetry hints at Christ-like wonders (walking the sunlit sea) transcending mere human capacity for expression. Yet, she suggests even when his verse falls short of performing miracles, becoming obscure ('wan moon is all the light thereof') or full of self-doubt ('wan water trembles in the grove') it still succeeds in paying homage to her holy 'name' by making it a musical accompaniment or 'voluntary' that is an organ solo played during church service, implying that he is still rewarded for the attempt at devotion. That the beloved chooses not to pronounce her sacred name highlights Rossetti's insistence that she remain aloof, untouchable and self-contained, preserving her eternal mystery and emphasising the sense of privilege and exclusivity involved in speaking of her – not for human hearing or perhaps a blessing only rarely bestowed. A counterpoint to this striking sonnet in *The House of Life*, may be found in Canto XXXI of Dante's *Paradiso*. Dante's depiction of Beatrice, as we have seen, has her resemble Christ in all senses but particularly in her loquaciousness as the divine Word. Throughout the *Commedia* her speech is audible (even in Hell) commanding, childing, teaching and reassuring the pilgrim. As such, one of the most surprising moments in *Paradiso* occurs when Beatrice, silently resumes her seat in the Celestial Rose, and passes on her role as the pilgrim's guide to Bernard of Clairvaux. The pilgrim observes:

  I expected one thing but another answered
me: I thought to see Beatrice, but I saw an old
man clothed like the glorious ones […]
  And "Where is she?" I quickly said.
wherefore he: "To bring your desire to its last
fulfilment, Beatrice has sent me from my place[67]

[Uno intendëa, e altro mi rispuose:
Credea veder Beatrice, e vidi un sene

[66] 'Passion and Worship', *CW*, ll.9-14, p.280.
[67] *Paradiso*, 31.58-66, pp.622-3.

vestito con le genti gloriose […]
E: "Ov' è ella?" sùbito diss' io.
Ond' elli: "A terminar lo tuo disiro
Mosse Beatrice me del loco mio]

What is crucial here is that it is by Beatrice's permission , as always, that the pilgrim is sent forth to find his 'last fulfilment' (to see God) at the opportune moment, after she has taught him everything he knows, because it is now for him to voluntarily *choose* to become an instrument of God's will or as Bonaventure would say 'enter into the darkness'. While Rossetti's beloved breaks her silence to bless his miraculous poetic vision, Dante's Beatrice turns silent so that the pilgrim might perform a poetic miracle – describe the indescribable. Yet, as the beloved indicates poetic expression only reaches its pinnacle, for both Rossetti and Dante, when it pledges both affection and adulation – when 'desire and the *velle* [will]' are turned by divine love. [68]

Although Dante names his great love Beatrice (unlike Rossetti) her name itself signifies that she is something more than human as 'the beatifier' most closely associating her, again, with Christ. This is also why, as the Word incarnate, she speaks with such authority on spiritual matters. However, Rossetti's beloved is not only Christ-like but comes to represent an all-encompassing figure of divinity. By ritually rendering the beloved's name unspeakable throughout his poetry, Rossetti amplifies not only her divinity but also her hiddenness from him, electing to reverentially speak of her holy name or as my 'lady'[69]. By doing so, he implies that his speaker's manner of address is prayer-like, a hushed reverential whisper in which he barely utters the name (that remains unsaid). The speaker ends 'Love's Nocturne' by petitioning his beloved as divine love: 'Master, Lord,/ In her name implor'd, O hear!' [70]; the speaker of 'The Portrait' sees his artistry as motivated by her divine authority and as an act of worship: 'O love! let this lady's picture glow/ Under my hand to praise her name, and show/ Even then of her inner self the perfect whole'[71]; and in 'Venus Victrix' the speaker depicts the terrible and unforeseen consequences of hearing the beloved's sacred name:

[68] *Paradiso*, 33.143, pp.666-7.
[69] See Bridal Birth l.3, p.276; Heart's Hope l.6, p.278; The Kiss l.5, p.278; Supreme Surrender l.3, p.279; Love's Lovers l.9, p.280; Passion and Worship l.2, p.280; The Portrait l.2, p.281; Gracious Moonlight l.4, p.286; Love's Baubles l.9, p.287; The Moonstar l.1, p.290; Life-in-Love l.2, p.294 and The Morrow's Message l.12, p.295.
[70] 'Love's Nocturn', *CW*, l.154, p.231.
[71] 'The Portrait', l.2-4, p.281.

Before such triune loveliness divine
  Awestruck I ask, which goddess here most claims
The prize that, howsoe'er adjudged, is thine?
  Then Love breathes low the sweetest of thy names;
And Venus Victrix to my heart doth bring
Herself, the Helen of her guerdoning.[72]

For the speaker, the beloved is the epitome of feminine 'loveliness divine', at once 'Juno', 'Venus', and 'Helen', embodying a new trinity of the Mother (Goddess of Childbirth and Marriage), the Daughter (beauty incarnate) and the Spirit of Love itself (Venus). Yet, such a maternal and matrilineal world, though seemingly gentle and peaceful because 'Love breathes low the sweetest of thy names' to the speaker (again a 'name' that remains unheard by the reader) is far from benign, because this act of suggestion is the catalyst to calamity (Venus speaks Helen's name into Paris' ear, kindling his love for Helen and leading to the fall of Troy). Hence, for Rossetti the beloved's name is not to be taken lightly, but reverently and with caution because it stirs the imagination, causes fascination and humbles the speaker before his beloved (making him 'Awestruck'). Rossetti deliberately leaves the consequences of this speech act unresolved by the end of this sonnet in order to suggest that the any anxiety that might underlie it is eclipsed by the speaker's masochistic desire for the beloved. She may or may not be a source of conflict – but such adversity remains the 'sweetest' of all experiences.

Rossetti suggests that voicing the beloved's name surpasses all poetical attempts at capturing her essence, which the speaker of 'Her Gifts' acknowledges:

High grace, the dower of queens; and therewithal
  Some wood-born wonder's sweet simplicity;
  A glance like water brimming with the sky
Or hyacinth-light where forest-shadows fall;
Such thrilling pallor of cheek as doth enthral
  The heart; a mouth whose passionate forms imply
  All music and all silence held thereby;
Deep golden locks, her sovereign coronal;
A round reared neck, meet column of Love's shrine
  To cling to when the heart takes sanctuary;
  Hands which for ever at Love's bidding be,
And soft-stirred feet still answering to his sign:—

[72] 'Venus Victrix', *CW*, ll.9-14, p.292.

These are her gifts, as tongue may tell them o'er.
Breathe low her name, my soul; for that means more.[73]

Rossetti's speaker identifies his beloved as the keeper of 'High grace', carrying the divine ability to spiritually heal him through her mercy and love, without which, as Bonaventure and Dante have suggested, none can be reconciled to the presence of God. Through the archaic use of 'dower' Rossetti insinuates that grace might be inherited or received by the lover through a kind of mystical marriage with his beloved, restoring them both to a pre-Fallen world and a state of Edenic innocence: 'Some wood-born wonder's sweet simplicity'. Although the speaker can recognize the beloved as the way to spiritual ascent, observing her ineffability in her outward, physical 'forms' which 'imply/ All music and all silence held thereby' (the signifier of Love's 'sign'), he also understands the limitations of his speech that can only relate but cannot bring about mystical experience. The speaker admits that speech must give way to silence in order to seek after the grace-giving experience: 'These are her gifts, as tongue may tell them o'er./ Breathe low her name, my soul; for that means more.'. Rossetti constructs an image that unites an immortal essence with a visceral physiological process, concurrently immaterial, inanimate yet sentient: a soul that breathes the beloved's 'name' highlighting the dual spiritual-physical nature of mystical experience. He suggests that the beloved is written into every fibre of the speaker's being and yet she escapes definition or linguistic signification, knowable only as that which stays unspeakable. Thus, Rossetti demonstrates a highly apophatic streak in his poetry, offering the reader through language, the language-defeating reality of the divine beloved.

Rossetti's speaker only ever gets close to pronouncing his beloved's name through indirection and allusion to Dante's Beatrice. The speaker of 'Hope Overtaken' conflates Dante's descriptions of Beatrice with the beloved, the name of Love, and the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity (or love) in a single sestet:

O Hope of mine whose eyes are living love,
  No eyes but hers, – O Love and Hope the same!
Lean close to me, for now the sinking sun
That warmed our feet scarce gilds our hairs above
  O hers thy voice and hers thy name!

[73] 'Her Gifts', ll.1-14, p.291.

Alas, cling round me, for the day is done![74]

The speaker's description of the beloved recalls the pilgrim's vision both of Beatrice unveiled and the Godhead at the culmination of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* respectively. The pilgrim declares Beatrice to be 'O splendor of eternal, living light'[75] endowing her physical appearance with sacred meaning, becoming 'the living Light'[76] or spiritually sustaining nectar at the heart of the Celestial Rose. By blending the beloved's eyes with the 'living love' of Beatrice and 'God'[77], Rossetti highlights how the speaker is unable to distinguish between the spiritual love he finds with the beloved and divine love: 'O hers thy voice and hers thy name!'. Thus, Rossetti reveals the beloved's name through a mellifluous plenitude of names – she is at once love, hope, faith, Beatrice, beloved, God and life – replicating the rabbinic tradition of the seven names of God that once written cannot be erased because of their holiness: YHWH, Adonai, Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh, Adonai Tzevaot, El, Elohim, and El Shaddai.[78]

This sonnet anticipates the last poem of the entire *House of Life*, entitled 'The One Hope' (1881). In a letter to Alice Boyd, Rossetti described this poem as 'the longing for accomplishment of individual desire after death.'[79] Rossetti's sequence, like Bonaventure and Dante's journeys, culminates with a vision of holy silence, the quieting of (in Bonaventure's phrase) 'our cares, our desires and our imaginings'[80], which is taken over by a singleness of purpose:

When vain desire at last and vain regret
  Go hand in hand to death, and all is vain,
  What shall assuage the unforgotten pain
And teach the unforgetful to forget?
Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet,—
  Or may the soul at once in a green plain
  Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain
And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet?

Ah! when the wan soul in that golden air
  Between the scriptured petals softly blown
  Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown,—

[74] 'Hope Overtaken', *CW*, ll.9-14, p.297
[75] *Purgatorio*, 31.139, p.537.
[76] *Paradiso*, 33.110, p.667.
[77] 'Hope Overtaken', l.5, p.297
[78] Karesh, 'God, Names of', p.179.
[79] *LDGR*, II, p.821.
[80] Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, 7.6, p.116.

Ah! let none other alien spell soe'er
But only the one Hope's one name be there,—
  Not less nor more, but even that word alone.[81]

Rossetti presents his speaker like Bonaventure's wayfarer, who sheds his earthly trappings of perception and emotion 'vain desire' and memory 'vain regret' by voluntarily going 'hand in hand to death' until 'all is vain'. Rossetti creates a trinity of ineffectuality in order to show the futility of language in the face of an unknowable experience yet concurrently implies through the repetition of 'vain' that what has been abandoned is self-love of 'all' kinds. The speaker looks for consolation in the Lethe of Dante's Earthly Paradise, as has been noted by Brian Donelly and others, recalling the reunion of Dante and Beatrice 'at once in a green plain', in which 'the soul' is purified of its sins ('through the spray of some sweet life-fountain') in a ritual baptism in preparation for arrival into the heavenly paradise.[82] However, Rossetti also suggests a movement into the Empyrean, by recalling the glass-like cosmological structure of *Paradiso* because the 'amulet' that guards against damnation is a 'dew-drenched' flower. This coupled with the soul's sudden disembodiment in the sestet, which becomes pure spirit or 'wan' replicating the translucent souls of the blessed, anticipates an ethereal motion through 'that golden air' towards Dante's river of light in the Empyrean and 'the scriptured petals' that hints at the prophesized floral arrangement of Heaven, the Celestial Rose.[83]

It is here, at the foot of the Rose, that Beatrice stops guiding the pilgrim. It is fitting, then, that it is here that Rossetti speaker finds himself uncertain once again whether the beloved's salvific power will be enough to raise him out of obscurity and pain but that despite his insecurities, he still describes himself as peering 'breathless for the gift of grace unknown'.

[81] 'The One Hope', ll.1-14, p.325.
[82] Brian Donelly, 'The Poetics of Ownership', *Reading Dante Gabriel Rossetti: the painter as poet* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016) p.80. See also Rees, p.136.
[83] See *Paradiso* 30.61-66, p.603: 'And I saw light in the form of a river, radiant/ as gold, between two banks painted with wonderous spring blossoming;/ from that flowing issued living sparks, and on/ every side they entered into flowers, like/ rubies circumscribed by gold' and 30.112-6, p.607: 'I saw/ mirroring themselves, in more than a thousand/ tiers, as many of us as have returned up there […] how great is the breadth of this rose in its remotest petals!'.

Rossetti's repeated use of 'Ah!' represents visually and aurally the speaker's surrender to speechlessness. He starts to long for the utter contentment of assenting to God's will that characterizes his relationship with the beloved and his vision of Paradise, a linguistic signifier of his having touched the eternal and ineffable, reducing his speech to only a 'breathless', emotive gasp. Thus, like Bonaventure and Dante's pilgrim Rossetti opts to leaving the intellect and the self behind, depicting not the cessation of his speaker's desire but its reorientation towards its ultimate goal: to be reunited with 'Peace' and the 'one Hope 's one name' that is the unspeakable name of the beloved.

The speaker invokes his beloved name yet never voices it – keeping it hidden, unutterable and elusive, preserving her unknowability – and taking up a much-longed for silence in which there has been 'enough'[84] said: 'Not less nor more, but even that word alone.' Rossetti offers the reader 'that word alone' an insubstantial rhetoric gesture yet crammed with meaning, suggesting at once the union of the beloved and God who becomes 'the Word' incarnate, Beatrice and the beloved, the lover and the beloved, and hope and love. Although the single imagined 'word' might be any of the above, the transformative force that enables such linguistic multiplicity of meaning and literary fusion remains constant and emerges from Dante's last word on God: 'the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.[85] Love is the alpha and omega of Rossetti's poetry and it is a vision of love that his speaker finally surrenders to, in silence, wordlessly committing himself to what is beyond speech – that is the mysterious and ineffable workings of God as love.

Conclusion

Both Rossetti and Dante ultimately promote taking on an elective silence when it comes to speaking of mystical encounters with the divine. This is not just because of the inevitable and familiar limitations of human language, which fall short at describing *eros* let alone *agape*, neither is it a failure of the poetic enterprise. Rather, silence signals the success of man's reconciliation to God and his embracement of the (divine) Word. Souls in mystical repose reflect the complete satisfaction and serenity of those for whom what has already been said of God is 'enough' – so that accepting

[84] Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, 7.6, p.116.
[85] *Paradiso*, 33.127-45, p.666-7

and revelling in the glory of His love and will is all that is left. Any subsequent attempts at linguistic representation can only be moved by this love yet fail to capture its full effect.

For Rossetti, it is the beloved's non-answering silence, which represents the eternal mystery, and the wisdom and contentment that can only be found through the speaker's linguistic surrender to an experience that is beyond the self, beyond all human articulation, so that all he can do is struggle to find the words to glorify her name.

Even when words no longer lend themselves to adequately describe an encounter with the Divine Word, which for Rossetti represents an experience beyond all human conception that cannot be uttered, his subjects both break and preserve their silence. Rossetti's sonnets dramatize through their worshipful speakers and aloof, mysterious and unknowable beloved an allegory for the union between the human soul and God. By doing so, he presents mystical expression as flitting between loquaciousness and speechlessness, cataphatic and apophatic approaches to the divine, earth-shattering human experience and unknowability so that the speaker-poet represents the un-representable subject, the beloved as the ineffability of love itself.

Conclusion

Theodore Watts-Dunton, Victorian critic and poet, is now mostly remembered for his devoted friendship to Swinburne, steering him clear of his addiction to alcohol, offering him companionship and a regular routine in his final years but was also responsible for leading him out of his aesthetic and atheistic radicalism. Significantly, he was also an intimate friend of Rossetti during his last years, visiting him frequently from 1872 onwards, at Kelmscott Manor, and after his death remained in close contact with William Michael Rossetti.[1]

William Michael ends his *Memoir* (1895) with a selection of critical extracts on the subject of his brother's contribution to painting and poetry, amongst which he includes one written by Watts-Dunton that he prefaces with the comment: 'From Theodore Watts, who is here writing as much about Rossetti's fine art and his personality as about his poetry'.[2]

Watts-Dunton stresses that while Rossetti retains the energy and creativity of aestheticism he uniquely seeks to locate the point at which physical and spiritual beauty, aesthetic and theological modes of discourse overlap:

> To eliminate asceticism from romantic art, and yet to remain romantic; to retain that mysticism which alone can give life to romantic art, and yet to be as sensuous as the Titians who revived sensuousness at the sacrifice of mysticism – was the quest, more or less conscious, of Rossetti's genius. Throughout his life he had taken an interest in only four subjects – poetry, painting, mediæval mysticism, and woman. But then how passionate and how deep had been his interest in all these! There is not one love-sonnet in his book which is a merely literary production![3]

In Watts-Dunton's analysis, it is through the preservation of mediæval mysticism and apotheosis of woman that Rossetti was able to create a new kind of art, combining that sought to interrogate how 'sensuousness' (or the fallen nature of man) can interact

[1] Rikky Rooksby, *A. C. Swinburne: A Poet's Life* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), p.200.
[2] *FLM*, I., p. 432.
[3] *FLM*, I., p. 432.

with 'the [self-] sacrifice of mysticism' (the spiritual aspiration to be absorbed into the divine will). As Swinburne's biographer Rikky Rooksby described, Watts-Dunton:

> […] had an unorthodox religious outlook. He was a mystical free-thinker with a qualified belief in God and some experience of spiritualism and mesmerism […] Watts' mysticism was not of a contemplative, ascetic form, but romantic. His concept of a dark night of the soul was the absence of the Beloved, not the withdrawal of God.[4]

Watts-Dunton seems ideally situated to identify and explain modes of thought or patterns of imagery that form the more mystic and religious elements giving rise to Rossetti's 'genius'.

My research has sought to ally itself with the views of such as Watts-Dunton, Hall Caine and others, who recognized the complexities of Rossetti's interest in mysticism and religion. It has investigated a number of theological influences on the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and aimed to shed new light on the interconnections between the idealised erotic language of medieval mysticism, its presentation in Dante's *Commedia*, and the importance of tracking this through Rossetti's double language of desire. Rossetti thus emerges from this thesis as an artist both more engaged with Dante's *Commedia,* and more specifically engaged with the mystical theology that underpins Dante's attitude to desire, than has previously been thought. Certainly it has been in part my aim to demonstrate that Rossetti was more than an intellectually or morally inferior imitator of Dante on these subjects, although undoubtedly influenced by him.

It cannot be disputed that Rossetti's paintings and poetry are immersed in the sensual world and the emotional life. However, this does not preclude him from engagement with mystical questions, indeed the senses and emotions are at the heart of much medieval mysticism. Moreover, the mystical dimension in Rossetti's works stems from an upbringing steeped in Anglo-Catholicism, and an adult life in part spent reimagining and interrogating the aesthetics and theology of Dante's work, including the *Commedia*. Rossetti was psychologically, emotionally and aesthetically invested in the theological questions that were key for Dante, and for medieval religion: the

[4] Rooksby, p.251.

nature of the afterlife, divinity, the uses of prayer and praise, the nature of love and redemption, and the idea of reconciliation to God or the divine. His poetry reflects his unorthodox religious outlook, particularly in his aversion to dogma, doctrine or religious systems of control and attraction towards invoking religious sentiments, rituals, or personal experience as a route to the transcendent. As such to dismiss Rossetti purely as a 'fleshly' poet or painter (still very often an unspoken critical assumption or underpinning, even now), or to perpetuate a critical tradition that recovers him intellectually but keeps him within this 'fleshly' character as a kind of postmodern jester, is to overlook his significance within the history of mystical expression, as an interpreter of medieval mysticism for his own time, his contribution to Dante's afterlife in England beyond simply translating *La Vita Nuova*, and the religious genealogy of his double language of desire.

As Watts-Dunton implicitly recognized, Rossetti's treatment of theological issues in his works, is varied, complex, and paradoxical, yet it is always personal and driven by an original desire to love and feel loved by God or as the speaker of 'Soothsay' declares:

> To have loved and been beloved again
> Is the loftiest reach of Hope's bright wings[5]

The central theological preoccupation of his work is how can man relate to, or speak of, the divine? Rossetti answers this, I have argued, through his reading of Dante's *Commedia,* and particularly in Dante's divinization of Beatrice as the source and goal of all spiritual value, faith, and gateway to mystical union with God. In part as a response to Dante's beloved Beatrice, Rossetti crafts a complex, all-encompassing figure of divinity who stands for the sight and sound of God as Love. As such, Rossetti's poetry advocates a theology of eros, offering a way of speaking about God by proxy, or through association with the human beloved.

Rossetti's poetry can be called mystical insofar as it calls attention to God's absence from this world as the source of man's unquenchable desire to be reunited with Him. This is a desire that is all-pervading and never-ending, which would lead to complete

[5] 'Soothsay', *CW*, l.20-1, p.231.

apophaticism except that it is articulated and satisfied, in part, by what Montemaggi observes of Dante's pilgrim that is the lover's 'readiness to respond in love to the will and needs of another'[6] – the beloved. It is by experiencing human love that Rossetti's lover can prepare to assimilate and surrender himself to the ultimate Other, becoming absorbed into the infinite love of God. Simon Podmore pinpoints the conflicting drives that govern mystical desire for assimilation:

> Mysticism can easily seem to be a sanctum of ecstasy, transport and unity […] in which the human and divine assume the symbolic form of Lover and Beloved, becoming one in the assimilation of Love itself. Mysticism, in this vision, can thus be read as signifying the consummation of a primal, even infantile desire to become reabsorbed within the Mother, merging without distinction into the oblivion of symbiosis and assimilation […] The desire for mystical oblivion may indeed express a primal longing for oceanic union, for *eros* as a life-affirming force of creativity. Yet its shadow side can also express a self-nihilating desire to become nothing, to drown one's being in the abyss of non-being: a melancholy and self-destructive energy which opposes the life-seeking libido or *eros* with the self-negating death-drive of *Thanatos*.[7]

Rossetti's poetry operates on both sides of this divide, expressing at times a drive towards 'life-affirming' creativity and speech and a 'self-nihiliating desire to become nothing'.

While it is true that the speakers of Rossetti's poetry are never certain what they see, or do not see at death's door, the lasting impression of Rossetti's poetry, especially in *The House of Life*, is the triumph of hope over despair and love over death. Rossetti cannot know what is come in the hereafter but he hopes, returning to an optimistic default (which one might view as the optimism of Christian salvation) so that no matter how dim and distant this hope begins to look – it is still there – a hope against hope. Crucially where there is hope there is always the possibility of faith and it is on this note that the sequence ends with one word that encapsulates this hope: Love. The dream is always of an undying love, which in its utterance becomes reality.

My approach in this thesis has been to radically reconfigure our understanding of the Victorian language of desire, by exposing the theological genealogy inherent in

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[6] Montemaggi, p.87.
[7] Simon Podmore, 'Mysterium Horrendum: Mystical Theology and the Negative Numinous' in *Exploring Lost Dimensions in Christian Mysticism: Opening to the Mystical*, ed.by Louise Nelstrop et al. (London: Routledge, 2013), p.94-5.

subject-object relations, which transcends gender norms and reminds us that the spiritual can be sensual. It further reveals the common ground in discourses on desire occurring separately in medieval and Victorian scholarship, which when viewed in tandem may open up fruitful and insightful new pathways in both. This inter-disciplinary approach and reading across fields of study would only enrich further scholarly enquiries into medievalism, the Victorian revival of Dante, and the close-reading of poetry as theology. As Rossetti's poetic endeavours exemplify, this intellectual approach – taking a broad interest in the history of ideas – is something that the Victorians did not have a problem taking up in practice, reinventing medieval styles, ideas and modes of expression, so too should our critical methodology also account for this expansive historical outlook.

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